

# **The Toronto Origins of Ontario's 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy: Mobilizing Multiple Channels of Influence for Progressive Social Policy Change**

**Carol-Anne Hudson and Peter Graefe**

Paper submitted to the *Canadian Review of Social Policy*

## Introduction

Premier Dalton McGuinty's promise to pursue a provincial poverty reduction strategy during the 2007 election took many observers by surprise: such strategies might be on the policy agenda in Europe or Quebec, but they seemed quite divorced from Ontario policy discussions where poverty received some marginal attention in discussions of social assistance and social housing. Given his government's cautious style and weak commitment to social policy reform, it was a welcome surprise for many Ontarians to see his government champion such a broad idea rather than something more specific like previous commitments to a child benefit or full-day early learning. But where did the push for this anti-poverty strategy come from? Even if we accepted the view that the push for more inclusive policy measures within neoliberalism are driven less by traditional class actors, and more by centre-left political parties selling security to an economically insecure middle-class electorate (Craig and Cotterell, 2007), such measures do not emerge full blown in the minds of party strategists.

While tracing policy back to a single source is rarely possible, a systematic investigation can help narrow the field of the possible and greatly enrich our understanding of major influences. For example, some recent work on Ontario child care and on social policy renewal more generally has emphasized the role of Toronto based organizations and networks in setting

and influencing the provincial policy agenda (e.g. Mahon 2005; Mahon and Macdonald 2009). It may be worthwhile to assess whether the same could be said of the poverty reduction strategy. Indeed, the narrative we provide below provides another good example of that sort of dynamic at play. Mahon's work on childcare, however, has privileged an understanding of the agency of local actors and the limitations on that agency that result from the vertical and hierarchical institutional arrangements between levels of government. Less thought has been given to the tensions and limitations that arise from "horizontal" arrangements between Toronto-based organizations and organizations elsewhere in the province, or indeed between Toronto-based organizations themselves on points of program and strategy.

This article, while largely descriptive in cast, seeks to make two contributions. The first is a crucial empirical one of describing key moments in the early development of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, thereby laying bare key events, personalities and networks that to our knowledge have not yet been studied. This can usefully inform future analyses by other scholars, be they interprovincial comparisons or arguments about why Ontario adopted the poverty strategy that it did rather than another one. The second contribution is to deepen our understanding of the "geography" of social policy development in Ontario, and the difficult relationships that emerge between the central agenda-setting role of Toronto organizations and the demands for representation from other regions. Put otherwise, this analysis supports Mahon's understanding of how Toronto-based organizations often stand in as provincial associations in engaging the provincial state, and are assisted by the Toronto municipal state that is seeking certain policies for its own ends. It however renders that story more complex based on observations in the antipoverty sector. The article notes the tensions that arise from having that Toronto state/advocacy sector complex stand in for truly Ontario-wide organizations, and

secondarily those related to disputes on how to fashion a united appeal to the state. Given our interest in the sources of the Ontario strategy, our analysis is focussed on the period leading up to the announcement of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy in December 2008, although we do briefly look beyond that date to highlight the persistence of those tensions and their impact on poverty policy advocacy in Ontario.

### Toronto's Place in Ontario Social Policy-Making

Students of Ontario politics are aware of the relative weakness and lack of capacity of provincial representative organizations. In the absence of such organs, how does interest representation take place, and how do social demands get brought against the state? In recent work, Rianne Mahon has underlined the importance of Toronto as a place for such organization (Mahon 2005, 2006; Mahon and Macdonald 2010). This importance results from at least two factors. The first is the simple one that Toronto is the seat of provincial government, making it easy for Toronto-based advocates to “jump scale” and make demands on this government, as well as enabling key policy leaders to move between roles in provincial politics, municipal government and the non-profit sector. The second relates less to the coincidences of geography, than to long-standing political strategies adopted by the City of Toronto. Mahon describes the City as a “key driver” of innovative social projects and as a “spider weaving together a dense network of agencies and activists” able to exert significant progressive influence on the direction of provincial and federal social policy (Mahon, 2006; Mahon and Macdonald, 2010).

Important factors to consider in this context are the geographic and policy vision tensions that can result from this privileged place for Toronto organizations. While doing “double duty”

in lobbying and advocating with the provincial government clearly has its costs for Toronto-based organizations, it also provides them with a couple of advantages. First, the spokesperson role provides additional power in setting the advocacy program and strategy. This would include a veto over ideas that the organization could not permit itself to publicly espouse, but more importantly the capacity to be at the centre of decision-making and to selectively advance joint decisions. Second, this role also provides a set of linkages with state actors and with other advocates, providing further knowledge, expertise and access to decision-makers. In the process, there is a real possibility that tensions will arise between these “insider” organizations and the broader range of organizations in whose name they are advocating. As we will underline later, this fed into disagreements about both *what* and *how* to advocate, or about both content and strategy. This was in part geographic, given that many regions already had developed their own blueprints which they hoped to advance through the process, and in part ideological with some more wedded to confrontational-outsider strategies and a more social democratic program, whilst others were intent not only on gaining but also maintaining a seat at the provincial table and sought to aggregate its interests and engage policymakers in a pragmatic manner around liberal demands. Although such “positive engagement” had the potential to limit overall gains, many hoped that it would be a corrective to earlier antagonisms that had developed during the Harris years, which had left many organizations outside the policy process altogether.

This tension is complex, and cannot necessarily be reduced to a “centre versus the regions” politics, or in this case to the critique of “Toronto-centricity.” Layered on top of such obvious tensions is the fact that what is being organized is also different over that space in terms of the relative importance of different actors. Anti-poverty networks outside of Toronto, for instance, may be more heavily weighted with social assistance recipients, and will tend to

develop poverty reduction ideas that give more attention to that group. The set of interests concentrated in Toronto may be more specialized, including child poverty groups, liberal-reformist foundations, anti-racist and feminist groups, and organizations representing low-paid workers, and as such may be open to different ideas and strategies. This is not to say that the same diversity of interests is not present in anti-poverty networks outside of Toronto, but simply that it seems to get organized and aggregated differently with a greater weight placed on the rights of social assistance recipients in those networks. As we will see later, the place of social assistance in a poverty strategy, and the question of whether it should be upgraded or replaced, was an important tension among anti-poverty organizations advocating for an anti-poverty strategy. As such, some of what looks like centre-region tensions translates into ideological and strategic disagreements over which interests and tactics should be prioritized in claims-making. This means that two tensions are worth studying when considering the dynamic of Toronto-based organizations advocating as provincial actors, namely the tension between the relative wealth of capacity and state-linkages of Toronto organizations and the relative poverty of such linkages for organizations elsewhere in the province, and the potential fragmentation of activist networks on the basis of representing different (e.g. social democratic versus liberal) interests. These dimensions are less evident in Mahon's analysis, probably due both to the narrower scope of interests being aggregated in child-care activism, and to the greater long-term efforts of groups in that sector to develop a shared and coherent set of principles.

In our attempt to probe the origins of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy with particular attention to its roots in Toronto, we make extensive use of interviews. This includes 94 in-depth interviews with members of the 25in5 Network for an Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, Ontario provincial government Ministers, political staff, senior civil servants, and Toronto

municipal councilors, city officials, business leaders, as well as civic leaders in fourteen communities outside Toronto between September 2008 and January 2010. Our analysis also draws on government and community reports and accounts of public consultation processes conducted between May and July 2008..

### **Ontario's Poverty Problem**

If the McGuinty Liberal government's adoption of a poverty reduction strategy is a surprise, it is not due to the lack of poverty, but a seeming lack of political interest in taking action. By the early 2000s, it was clear that neoliberal restructuring both at the provincial and urban level had created new social challenges especially related to poverty and social inequality. Ontario's overall poverty rate had reached 11.3% compared to 7.8% in 1980. Over the same period, poverty rates among newcomers and racialized groups had increased from 24.6% to 35.8% (Galabuzi, 2006). Other marginalized persons such as those with disabilities comprised 40% of all persons in lowest income brackets and were most likely to experience long-term unemployment. Precarious or limited employment opportunities and supports resulted in 50% of households headed by lone mothers and 34.2% of Aboriginal peoples living at or below the poverty line, double the general population (National Council of Welfare, 2006). More than 1.5 million Ontarians were spending more than 30% of their annual income on housing (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2005). Families in Ontario were experiencing greater inequality and polarization of incomes since the mid-1970s. The province's richest 10% of families saw their incomes increase to 75 times that of the poorest 10% while the incomes of middle-income families stagnated (Yalnizyan, 2007).

Toronto had also been steadily losing ground. Despite the lowest inflation and unemployment levels in two decades combined with stable labour productivity rates 5% above the national average and record gains in GDP, 23% of Torontonians lived below the Low-Income Cut-Off, more than double the provincial average and the number of Toronto families living in poverty had increased by 36.1%, the number of individuals living in poverty had increased by 5.3% and waiting lists for affordable housing had swelled to over 150,000, with average wait-times reaching an all-time high of eight years (Ontario, 2003; Shapcott, 2003; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2007).

Despite these trends, and despite the fact that urban poverty in particular was beginning to concern centrist policy analysts and more liberal minded members of the corporate sector (as seen in papers for the province's Role of Government Panel (Maxwell 2003) or in the Toronto City Summit Alliance's paper on income security (2006)), policy responses were in short supply. Indeed, headline policies of the Conservative government in office from 1995-2002 contributed to the problem. These policies included downloading half of welfare costs and full administration costs onto municipalities; cutting benefits by 21%, restricting eligibility and increasing surveillance of income support recipients; introducing workfare legislation; and downsizing the public sector.

The election of a friendlier Liberal provincial government in 2003, however, showed little promise of significant change. A series of bold reports strategizing solutions to the city's social problems failed to secure more than modest wage and income support increases and a review of Ontario's Employment Assistance programs contained within Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Programs (ODSP) (eg. TCSA 2003, 2006; Shillington and Fair

2001; TD Economics 2005, 2007; Stapleton 2004; Toronto Board of Trade 2003). By 2007, Liberal provincial budgets were largely deferrals on previous social development promises while strengthening commitments to deficit reduction and balanced budgets (MacKenzie, 2007). This slow response to Toronto's growing social crisis challenged progressive city councillors to respond in innovative ways to the neoliberal practices and processes moulding Toronto into a competitive city (Kipfer and Keil, 2002).

### **Toronto's Poverty Solution: Poverty Reduction and a Third-Party Strategy**

On May 3, 2007 Toronto's Community Development and Recreation Committee (CDRC) convened a special public meeting in the Council Chambers of North York's Civic Centre to discuss income security issues in the city. Councillors Mihevc, Augimeri, Davis and Nunziata presided along with Department of Social Services employee Jennifer Posthumus. Sixteen presentations were made from representatives of such diverse organizations as the C.D. Howe Institute, the Urban Institute at the University of Toronto, the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW), the Maytree Foundation, Voices From the Street, the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC), the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC), Campaign 2000, and The Stop Community Food Centre. Seven submissions were also communicated to the committee by advocates for the homeless, community legal clinics and health centres. The deputants shared their concerns about rapidly rising urban poverty, particularly as it related to the lack of good jobs and minimum wages insufficient to sustain a decent standard of living. Failing to meet quorum, some members of the CDRC and the public were concerned that their report would not be picked-up by the larger City Council, so they agreed to continue working together to circumvent the municipal level and directly press the provincial government for a poverty reduction strategy.

City officials, however, were in a difficult position as the city had petitioned the McGuinty government in 2003 to open negotiations for renewing the *City of Toronto Act* and had withdrawn from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) in 2004 in order to seek greater autonomy and enhanced powers to directly engage the federal government (Côté, 2009). The city was also in negotiations with the provincial government regarding a Provincial-Municipal Fiscal and Service Delivery Review in hopes of uploading costs associated with the OW and ODSP programs. Therefore, the city could not be seen as engaging in “government to government” contestation, nor could the city be seen as leading a movement against the provincial government. What was needed was a “third party community organization” to confront the provincial government on social policy reform, where the city could act as a silent partner (Interview with Shirley Hoy, Toronto City Manager 2001-2007).

Following this decision, in early June 2007, the City of Toronto seconded Jennifer Posthumus and Yasmin Faulds to the fledgling anti-poverty coalition to provide a small secretariat as well as office space and some administrative overhead. This post-CDRC organization (comprised of John Stapleton from the Metcalf Foundation, ISAC, The Stop, Voices from the Street, CSPC, and C2000) was soon joined by several other groups already engaged in local, municipal, provincial and national anti-poverty campaigns. The group expanded by invitation to include The Daily Bread Food Bank, the Wellesley Institute, Ontario Association of Food Banks, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), St. Christopher House, Ontario Federation of Labour, the United Way of Toronto, Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, the Mennonite Central Committee for Ontario and the Atkinson Foundation. Over the summer of 2007 other groups were invited to join including the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO), The Colour of Poverty, and KAIROS. This group became the decision-making body

and formed a Cross-Community Action Table (CCAT) which would become the future 25in5 Network steering committee.

Parallel to the group developing a core membership, Michael Oliphant with The Daily Bread Food Bank invited Lisa Harker, Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research in the United Kingdom and chief architect of Tony Blair's 1999 pledge to reduce poverty by 25% in 5 years, to speak at the Food Bank's annual conference. During her visit Ms. Harker met with members of the post-CDRC organization to discuss goals and strategy. She emphasized that the first and most important step should be to secure a political commitment from the government to set targets and measures to end poverty. This would provide the group and public with the necessary leverage to "hold the government's feet to the fire" (Interview with Lisa Harker and Michael Oliphant). The goal of seeking a political commitment was concretized during the summer of 2007, in time for the October 2007 provincial election. Key group members met "quietly on the side" with Deborah Matthews (Minister of Youth and Children's Services) and the Conservative and New Democratic Party leaders to seek a public commitment to poverty reduction. Both the NDP and the Conservatives refused to make any motion towards supporting a poverty reduction strategy if elected. The NDP's refusal might seem curious, and indeed alienated many potential allies in the antipoverty sector, but reflected their success in by-elections with a narrower minimum wage platform. Minister Matthews, by contrast, indicated that the government would consider making a commitment if they could be guaranteed support. In other words, the government would provide the political will if the group could deliver a supportive constituency (Anonymous interviews).

Building on this positive response from the Liberals, St. Christopher House organized a mass rally for October 1, 2007 at Massey Hall to “Vote Out Poverty”. The aim was to raise awareness of growing urban poverty and to bring these issues into the electoral arena. During the rally, McGuinty agreed that “if the Liberals are re-elected, he'll make poverty reduction a priority and he'll introduce firm reduction targets within a year so the government can be measured on its progress” (Toronto Star, October 2, 2007). The Liberals were re-elected and during their November 29, 2007 Speech from the Throne, McGuinty promised to establish a Special Cabinet Committee to develop strategies for poverty reduction in Ontario by December 2008. Up to this point, then, the idea of adopting a poverty reduction strategy in Ontario was the result of a “made-in-Toronto” complicity between progressive councillors and Toronto-based poverty organizations.

### **Mobilizing to Engage the Provincial Government on Poverty Reduction**

This public commitment and re-election of the Liberals opened the door for the post-CDRC group. Between October 2007 and January 2008 the small ad hoc group undertook several actions that would both concretize a plan for interest representation and create more direct linkage to the provincial government for communities across Ontario. During Campaign 2000's National Forum on Living Wages in September 2007, the group had been strongly influenced by Lana Payne, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour and a key player involved in that province's adoption of a poverty reduction strategy in 2006. In particular, the group was inspired to 1) emulate the loose network organizational structure used in Newfoundland as the best means to quickly mobilize a province-wide movement, 2) develop an alternative community-based policy agenda; 3) promote this alternative blueprint by creating

greater access and more extensive influence channels with elected officials, especially Cabinet Ministers; and, 4) pursue positive engagement with the government. Secondary strategies, also suggested by Payne, would be to secure “endorsements” from a broad range of public figures and organizations and to court Media attention to lend important public weight to the movement (Interviews with Cindy Wilke, Greg DeGroot-Maggetti and Lana Payne).

Recalling Lisa Harker’s advice related to foregrounding targets and measures, the group formally adopted the name *25in5: Network for a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario* to signal their intention of seeking specific political commitments to reducing poverty in Ontario by 25% within 5 years. The 25in5 Network set-up a website, posted reports by academics and experts from a wide range of sectors, enlisted Peter Clutterbuck to use the coalition of social planning councils in the province to mobilize community groups outside Toronto, and, most importantly, secured financial backing from the Atkinson Foundation. By the time the government announced the formation of its Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction in February 2008, the 25in5 Network was preparing to move into the second phase of its mobilization, namely, building a popular base.

### **Mobilizing and Containing of Multiple Channels of Influence: Towards Developing an Alternative**

In early February 2008, the 25in5 Network steering committee began to strategize the public mobilization phase. Given such a wide-range of participants with independent mandates related to their organizational affiliations and limited timeframe permitted for public consultations and public submissions, it was clear that a consensus-building approach would not be possible. Each member organization, therefore, would be encouraged to take action on their

own terms following a template issued from the centre (Interview with Maureen Fair, St. Christopher House). In the short term, this had the merit of papering over differences. Yet, to the extent that different members had different degrees of influence and access, it displaced the conflict over these differences to the day when certain aspects of the template would be taken up in the provincial strategy while other aspects would be dropped. Given the range of organizations involved, any presentation of fault lines runs into “straddlers” or risks ignoring the capacity of certain groups to work across their differences. Nevertheless, in our view the primary line of tension was an ideological and strategic one between a social liberalism trying to incrementally build a new welfare architecture, and a social democratic strategy focussed more on protecting the Keynesian Welfare State and rebuilding those aspects that had been harmed by neoliberalism. We will discuss each in turn, noting their distinct “geographies”.

#### *Social Liberalism: the Centre, New Welfare Architecture and Incrementalism*

A key ideological pole within 25in5 could be characterized as “social liberal”. It recognized that poverty and inequality put a lie to liberal ideals of full participation and development, and so sought forms of social policy renewal that might prove more enabling to individuals, without necessarily revisiting the deeper economic and social structures producing poverty. Perhaps the most influential person in defining this template was John Stapleton, a former senior civil servant in the Ministry of Community and Social Services, with a long-held vision of reconstructing the provincial welfare system. Stapleton moved to resurrect the Social Security System Model from the federal government’s 1973 Orange Book or *Working Paper on Social Security in Canada* (Interview with John Stapleton). Extending the Orange Book’s thinking, the policy solution to reducing poverty should therefore include: 1) an employment strategy that provided work incentives to social assistance recipients, in particular, making

training and employment opportunities more available; 2) investments in extensive training, re-skilling, counselling and placement assistance for displaced workers to transition to jobs in the new economy; 3) community-centred initiatives and supports for welfare to work and transitioning new economy workers; 4) opportunities for people to save and build assets for life contingencies; and, 5) extension of income supports for the working poor.

A predominant number of steering committee members including those from the Wellesley Institute, Campaign 2000, United Way of Toronto, Daily Bread Food Bank and the Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB), St. Christopher House, and the Atkinson Foundation agreed that this framework would present the government with a “user-friendly” alternative social policy agenda. It was also hoped that by delegating policy areas to relevant specialists within the Network (i.e., housing, children’s issues, youth job attachment) a more nuanced, evidence-based approach to the policy makers (Cabinet Ministers) would develop. That is, an alternative agenda would be pragmatic and non-ideological. It was proposed that 25in5’s blueprint for social policy reform would fit easily within the existing system allowing for a gradual shift away from the “patchwork of programs” of an earlier era.

Using this template, Stapleton, the OAFB and the Daily Bread Food Bank met frequently with Ministers Matthews (CYS), Milloy (TCU), and advisors within the Premier’s and Matthew’s office to promote a new employment strategy. This strategy focused on the working poor and centred on three initiatives: asset building, retraining, and work incentives. Asset building recommendations included raising limits for those on social assistance and legal aid to \$5,000 for single people and \$10,000 for families and people with disabilities, increasing exemptions for registered instruments like Tax-Free Savings Accounts and RRSPs, and

exempting all assets for the first six months of receipt of assistance as well as eliminating the option to asset test subsidized housing under the Social Housing Reform Act. Recommended incentives to stabilize employment included extended medical provisions including full dental, vision, and pharmaceuticals as well as public transportation subsidies to all low-income workers. Alongside this, Nathan Gilbert with the Laidlaw Foundation continued its advocacy for extended medical, educational and training supports to Crown Wards through meetings with the Ministers of Health and Long-Term Care and of Training, Colleges and Universities. A number of business leaders, such as the Chief Economist for TD Bank, were fully supportive of these poverty reduction initiatives and agreed not to publically contest 25in5 activities (Interviews with Don Drummond, Nathan Gilbert, Michael Shapcott).

Complementing this employment strategy was an income supplementation and early childhood intervention strategy championed by the Atkinson Foundation, Campaign 2000 and St. Christopher House (Interviews with Pedro Barata, Charles Pascal, Maureen Fair, Jacquie Maund and Laurel Rothman). Here intensive consultations occurred with the Ministers of Education, of Finance, of Community and Social Services and of Children and Youth Services, in addition to their political staff and senior civil servants as well as John Brodhead and Shannon Fuller in the Premier's Office. The focus of these extensive high level meetings was a full roll-out of the Ontario Child Benefit introduced in the 2007 budget partnered with a comprehensive early learning strategy. Preliminary 25in5 policy recommendations featured four key components: full-day learning for 4-5 year olds; before and after school programs for all children age 6-12; the creation of school-centred community hubs to consolidate all child and family programs into the existing network of Best Start Child and Family Centres; and, improved parental leave and benefits program. The idea of promoting community hubs and expanded social investments for

localized service delivery fit well with the City of Toronto's social inclusion agenda developed in its *Starting in the Right Place: A New Approach to Employment and Social Services (2008)* (Interview with Joe T. Manion).

Seeking to expand on the idea of community hubs, the Wellesley Institute, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto and United Way of Toronto engaged in extensive meetings with the Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing of Citizenship and Immigration, and of Health as well as Deb Matthews and the Finance Minister Dwight Duncan. The goal here was twofold: 1) to highlight that poverty has a spatial element; and, 2) to help push forward Bill 152: The Poverty Reduction Act (Interviews with Peter Alexander (UWT) and John Campey). In particular, these groups sought political commitments to a comprehensive social innovation strategy that included: community-based research, evaluation of social policy impact on neighbourhoods, a move beyond government/expert driven initiatives and to engage people with lived experience and greater receptivity to community-driven programs and policy proposals, local social housing initiatives to address homeless children in the education system, secure funding for the Third Sector and the establishment of a network for positive engagement with local businesses.

Be it in employment, early childhood intervention or community planning, then, the key actors at the centre of these strategies were almost exclusively based in Toronto, and their agenda remained largely social liberal in seeking to reduce poverty in ways that went with the grain of existing labour markets, and whose budgetary impact, while not insubstantial in the case of the child benefit and early learning, could be accommodated given existing rates of economic growth.

*Challenging the Template: The Regions, Defending the Keynesian Welfare State and Radical Change*

There was considerable debate both among some Toronto-based members of 25in5's steering committee and community leaders outside Toronto with regard to adopting this template for poverty reduction and mobilizing political influence. These members might be grouped as favouring a "social democratic" program, whereby we mean that they saw the necessity to regulate the labour market in certain ways as part of poverty reduction, and that they were in favour of a mix of policies that ultimately would require a break with neoliberal budgetary orthodoxy by raising taxation and spending in support of income assistance, housing and public services.

This group gathered some progressive Toronto city councillors along with anti-poverty organizations such as Ontario Coalition for Social Justice, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, The Stop Community Food Centre, The Colour of Poverty, KAIROS, ODSP Action Committee, Ontario Federation of Labour, the Worker's Action Centre, the Social Planning Network of Ontario and their extended network of Social Planning Councils (including Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Cambridge, Halton, Hamilton, Windsor, Kingston, Kitchener-Waterloo, Cornwall and Ottawa). They had three major concerns with the social liberal program. First, recommending a poverty reduction strategy that focused on children and families presented the issue as one of superficial economic exclusion that could be fixed with more attention to education and training programs. This detracted from the real problem, which in their view was the trend toward greater concentration of wealth and power that resulted in less democratic and just societies. Second, the emphasis on urban poverty, while significant, left little room for addressing rural and small town issues. Finally, there was concern that pursuing a strategy of

greater political access and influence along the lines of individual organizational policy expertise risked both government co-optation and 25in5's poverty reduction strategy "dwindling into pet projects" within pet Ministries and depending entirely on the strength of lobbying, disadvantaging outlying communities and less resourced organizations. Some in the core membership believed that a more disengaged strategy would enable them to sustain pressure on the government (through accountability and monitoring mechanisms) and encourage government conversations with other jurisdictions (such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and Manitoba) and not just government to 25in5 discussions leading, perhaps, to a pan-Canadian poverty reduction strategy (Anonymous interviews).

The policy solution, for those members challenging the centre's template, lay not in designing a new welfare state or "throwing the baby out with the bath water" as one organization commented. Rather, it was important to defend the social gains made during the heyday of the postwar Keynesian welfare state and to deal directly with the deficiencies of that model around gender and racial equity, benefits adequacy and labour market regulation. Considering the great social losses experienced during the Harris and Eves' governments, these members argued for immediate restoration of Ontario's pre-neoliberal welfare state, particularly around benefits, universality and voluntarism. At the time, this did not seem unreasonable as the province had just been through a period of unprecedented economic expansion.

Many members challenging the "centre" believed that a poverty reduction strategy should be founded on principles of social justice and citizenship entitlements and hinged first and foremost on transformation of labour markets. According to the Colour of Poverty, the Worker's Action Centre and Ontario Federation of Labour, the government needed to recognize that earlier

promises of full employment would never be possible in the new economy and that the new economy trapped many, especially women, newcomers, Aboriginals and visible minorities in low wage precarious employment primarily within the growing service sector. Policy recommendations must include amendments to the Employment Standards Act (ESA) to cover new forms of work, living wage policies, institutionalization of Equity and Anti-racism practices, and improved enforcement of the ESA (Interviews with Mike Belmore, Sheila Block (OFL) and Michael Kerr).

According to ISARC, OCSJ, The Stop, KAIROS and Social Planning Councils across Ontario a full review of social assistance was needed to bring the system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This would include: restoration of benefits to levels before the Harris government and indexing rates beginning in 2010; a \$100 food supplement to help with the high cost of food particularly in northern and rural areas; high quality affordable daycare; full transportation subsidies for low-income citizens; an end to clawbacks on the OCB; and, addressing the punitive nature of rules and regulations and streamlining OW/ODSP program access and delivery (Interviews with Brice Balmer and John Argue). It was in this set of demands that one most hears the voice of local anti-poverty networks from around the province. As can be seen, they are joined by a number of Toronto-based organizations, so the tension is not purely a Toronto/Rest of Ontario one

Striking a balance between demanding a radical updating of Ontario's social assistance programs and accessing influence channels established by the centre proved to be very difficult for many communities outside Toronto. While the majority of communities had developed considerable social policy expertise as outsiders during the neoliberal administrations of Harris and Eves and had prepared their own poverty reduction strategies prior to the emergence of

25in5 (e.g. Social Planning Council of Sudbury 2008<sup>9</sup>; CHEO Networks 2008; Kitchener Social and Economic Working Group 2008; Sisters of Providence 2006),<sup>1</sup> many still lacked experience with, or opportunities for, political engagement. The regions, in many instances, needed the centre to facilitate political meetings. This was especially the case in smaller, more distant communities like Thunder Bay, Windsor, Cornwall and Ottawa (Interviews with Mehroon Kassam, Aaron Park, Adam Vasey and Linda Lalonde). These communities valued the new political access yet felt constrained by the centre's template and when challenging it with more confrontational tactics they were often perceived by some centralized members of 25in5 and government officials as not willing to act as allies either with the 25in5 Network or government toward developing a poverty reduction strategy. Even though more experienced and highly respected powerbrokers like Janet Gasparini Executive Director of Sudbury's Social Planning Council, Aaron Park Executive Director of Thunder Bay's Social Planning Council, Linda Lalonde Chair of Ottawa Poverty Reduction Network and Dr. Joey Edwardh Executive Director of Halton's Social Planning Council did participate in face to face meetings with key Cabinet Ministers and high level civil servants, this did little to advance or secure support for outlying regions or more social democratic policies (Interviews with Janet Gasparini, Joey Edwardh, Linda Lalonde and Aaron Park). And while the SPNO did act to pull them into 25in5 as part of a social democratic pole, the SPNO too had a policy template different from those developed

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example, *Community Strategy to Reduce Poverty in the City of Greater Sudbury* (Social Planning Council of Sudbury, March 2008); Ottawa based Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Networks, *Poverty Makes Me Sick* June 2008; Kitchener Social and Economic Working Group, *Poverty Reduction in Kitchener: Awareness, Advocacy and Action* (Kitchener, April 2008); and, Sisters of Providence, Kingston Faith and Justice Coalition, *The Grand Experiment and the Great Wall: A Social Audit of the Kingston Community* (ISARC, 2006).

autonomously in the other centres, and indeed threatened to stand in the way of the direct presentation of those community-based plans to the Ontario government.

### **An Alternative Anti-poverty Policy Emerges: A Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario**

Despite these tensions, the post-CDRC group had successfully realized their initial goals, shared by the progressive Toronto city councillors, of getting poverty on the political agenda, of mobilizing broader channels of influence and of striking agreement on important priorities to put before the provincial government as it finalized its strategy. The three key priorities became the “pillars” of *A Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario* submitted to the provincial government in August 2008, and published in revised form in February 2009, between the announcement of the government’s policy in December 2008 and the 2009 budget.

The first priority centred on the working poor and families with at least one adult working full-time, full-year. The expectation was that any adult working full-time, full-year should enjoy a decent standard of living above the poverty line, and to that end demanded a mix of higher minimum wages, initiatives to ease union certification, improved enforcement of labour standards and employment equity programs. A second priority concerned those Ontarians whose incomes were so low that they were deprived of a dignified existence. This included: citizens dependent on state supports, especially people with disabilities and single mothers, Aboriginals and newcomers, and those who faced economic exclusion due to race and/or ethnicity. Here the demands focused on expediting the introduction of an Ontario Child Benefit, improving social assistance and disability monthly benefits by \$100, and introducing a housing benefit modelled on the child benefit. Finally, the Network sought to reduce the transmission of poverty between

generations. In particular, the Network advocated for a new attitude toward strengthening communities and creating opportunities for full social, economic and political inclusion through investment in early learning for four year-olds, investment in social housing, equity initiatives in education and funding to help community groups and organizations expand critical services (25in5, 2009). Put another way, the Blueprint contained the growing tensions between the centre and the regions, and between the social liberals and the social democrats, by pitching a very broad programmatic tent. It gave a lot of space to social democratic demands, even as the social liberal insiders could see the outlines of progress on their own priorities.

The poverty reduction strategy unveiled in December 2008 delivered at best a half-loaf from the benchmark of the Blueprint. Rather than a general commitment to reduce poverty by 25% over 5 years, it delivered a specific commitment to reduce *child* poverty by that amount, with some further wiggle room in noting the need for supportive federal action. The headline initiative was the phased implementation of an income-tested Ontario Child Benefit of \$1,310 per year. Presumably this was felt to be adequate to lift enough children of working parents above the poverty line (the Low Income Measure) to meet the 25% goal. Other significant initiatives included the implementation of full-day early learning for 4 and 5 year olds, and new initiatives for “at-risk” kids (including a Crown Wards Success Strategy), largely to be delivered through the school system. Despite the child focus in measuring poverty reduction, a number of initiatives applied to adults, including a Community Opportunities Fund for community innovation, more money for employment standards enforcement and stabilized funding for the Rent Bank program, and the repackaging of a series of existing initiatives for adults. On the key files of social assistance and social housing, however, the report bought time by proposing the development of a long-term social housing strategy as well as a review of social assistance with a

particular eye to aiding transitions to employment (Ontario 2008). While developing a scorecard of winners and losers oversimplifies such a complex mix of initiatives, the strategy of 2008 could be seen as offering a series of openings to the social liberal initiatives emanating from the Toronto centre, while remaining largely uninterested in engaging the social democratic demands being organized out of the regional networks.

The official response from 25in5 was one of appreciation for what was in the policy, and encouragement to push forward in areas that had been left out. This again papered over divisions within the group, but raised the issue of coherent action moving forward now that different parts of the network had been “rewarded” in different manners. For the Toronto social liberals, the value of campaigning for social democratic demands that they did not always subscribe to in the first place was not clear. Indeed, having “won” something with the policy, the inclination was to solidify an insider position to ensure that tangible outputs flowed from the announcement. This left the regional anti-poverty networks and the Toronto social democrats largely in the lurch.

### **Aftermath and Conclusions**

In the aftermath of the announcement of the poverty reduction policy in December 2008, the tensions discussed above, between a social democratic vision and a liberal reform vision, and between Toronto and the rest of the province, became much clearer. Foundation funding for the SPNO’s participation in the 25in5 network was pulled, creating further distance between local anti-poverty organizations and the network’s steering committee. This led to an open schism between the social democrats and social liberals. On the social democratic side, the SPNO, the STOP, ISARC and others regrouped around a strategy of increasing the adequacy of rates for social assistance recipients. This took the form of various campaigns, such as Do the Math

(encouraging people, including elected representatives, to compare social assistance rates with what they calculated they needed to live on) and Put Food in the Budget (pressuring the provincial government to institute a \$100 healthy food supplement to social assistance rates). Over time, this has coalesced into Poverty Free Ontario. In the spring of 2011, Poverty Free Ontario had the SPNO's Peter Clutterbuck and Marvin Novick tour the province again, behind the three prong strategy. The first was to upgrade social assistance as part of poverty eradication, starting with a \$100 Healthy Food Supplement and building towards incomes at 80% of the after-tax low income measure. The second was to "end working poverty" by increasing minimum hourly wages to \$12.50 in 2014 and index them thereafter. The third was to "protect food money" by phasing in a full housing benefit to keep the share of housing costs at 30% of gross household budgets (Poverty Free Ontario 2011).

While the social democrats reverted to outside pressure strategies, the social liberal voices continued to engage the state from the inside. Here, the most important initiative was the Social Assistance Review Advisory Committee, a committee advising Minister Meilleur and MCSS on the terms of reference for the promised social assistance review. This committee included key steering committee members of 25in5, notably John Stapleton, Gail Nyberg and Michael Oliphant (Daily Bread Food Bank), Pedro Barata (Atkinson), Colette Murphy (Metcalf), Pat Capponi (Voices from the Street) and Grace-Edward Galabuzi (Colour of Poverty). While some like Galabuzi were closer to the social democratic pole, the balance tipped clearly towards the social liberals, and the report bears the strong flavour of Stapleton's program of comprehensive income security reform, supported here by fellow council member Michael Mendelson (Caledon Institute). It thus recommended that the *social assistance review* become an *income security review*, on the grounds that the way to fix a broken social assistance system

was to replace it with a different income security architecture. This would take the form of extending income and services received by social assistance recipients to all low-income Ontarians, creating a form of basic income, over which would be layered short-term support for the unemployed, opportunity planning and training programs, and measures to strengthen pay and working conditions at the low-end of the labour market (Social Assistance Review Advisory Council 2010).

While these programs can coexist peacefully, and there are ways that they do so (for instance in the Atkinson Foundation supporting political education activities and organizer training with groups closer to the Poverty Free Ontario network), the real tension has been around the issue of adequacy. Here, the local networks organized around social assistance recipients have been steadfast on the need for immediate increases in social assistance rates. The central network in Toronto, meanwhile, has been relatively open in seeing such an increase as misguided for at least two reasons. First, they believe an immediate rate increase is not a political winner with the existing government, and moreover would spark a backlash against social assistance in the broader population if implemented without other changes. Second, since the social democratic model is based on the idea of a guaranteed income raising rates means raising the level of that income and thus the up-front cost of a broader transformation of social assistance.

For the time being, these skirmishes around social assistance are nevertheless of secondary importance. The appetite of the government for new initiatives in poverty reduction is extremely limited, as this is not seen as a political winner. The Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, struck in November 2011, was given a more restrained mandate than the

Advisory Council suggested, and will report well after the provincial election, freeing the government from making meaningful promises on this file. While the future remains open, the 2008 policy and the mobilization preceding it point less to making poverty reduction part of the usual work of government, than to a further impetus to adopting a series of policies that were already in development, notably the Child Benefit, full-day early learning for 4-year olds, and policies for “at-risk” populations, be it in schools or with Crown wards.

As Rianne Mahon’s work might lead us to expect, Toronto-based organizations played a large role in provincial policy advocacy, and were enabled in this respect by municipal government actors seeking provincial action. Unlike the case of child care, this early enabling was not able to set in place a coherent advocacy strategy promoting the vision of the progressive councillors in the CRDC, due to divisions within the anti-poverty sector, divisions which mapped in part onto geographic divisions between Toronto and the rest of Ontario, but also reflected important differences between social liberalism and social democracy as adequate responses to the problem of poverty. These tensions have diffused the ability for joint action seen in the early stages of the poverty policy, and thus reduced the coherence of joint demands. Indeed, it is difficult to see how they can be reconciled in a new “blueprint” given the tension between the Toronto-based social liberal core of 25in5 and the social democratic forces spread out in anti-poverty networks across Ontario (including in Toronto). In sum, if social policy ideas in Ontario come from somewhere, chances are that place is Toronto, and quite likely in advocacy networks reaching back to the Toronto municipal government. However, the manner in which this birth plays out in terms of relations with the provincial state is complex, and an important part of that complexity is how Toronto-based advocacy defines its program and relates to interests mobilized elsewhere in the province.

## References

- 25in5. 2009. *A Blueprint for Economic Stimulus and Poverty Reduction in Ontario*.  
<http://www.25in5.ca/blueprint.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2011).
- Boudreau, Julie-Anne, Roger Keil and Douglas Young. 2009. *Changing Toronto: Governing Urban Neoliberalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bradford, Neil. 2003. "Public-Private Partnership? Shifting Paradigms of Economic Governance in Ontario", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (December) 36, 5,1005-1033.
- Brenner, Neil and Roger Keil (eds.). 2006. *The Global Cities Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- CHEO Networks 2008. *Poverty Makes Me Sick*. Ottawa: Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Networks.
- City of Toronto. 2008. *Starting in the Right Place: A New Approach to Employment and Social Services in Toronto*, available at:  
[http://www.toronto.ca/socialservices/pdf/reports/starting\\_right\\_place.pdf](http://www.toronto.ca/socialservices/pdf/reports/starting_right_place.pdf)
- Côté, Andre. 2009. *The Maturing Metropolis: Governance in Toronto a Decade After Amalgamation* University of Toronto.
- Craig, David and Gerard Cotterell. 2007. "Periodizing Neoliberalism," *Policy & Politics* 35, 3, 497-514.
- Fanelli, Carlo. 2009. "The City of Toronto Fiscal Crisis: Neoliberal Urbanism & The Reconsolidation of Class Power", *Interdisciplinary Themes Journal* 1, 1-8.
- Galabuzi, Grace-Edward. 2006. *Canada's Creeping Economic Apartheid* Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press.
- Government of Canada, *The Orange Book* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, April 18, 1973, p. 18.
- Kipfer, Stefan and Roger Keil. 2002. "Toronto Inc? Planning the Competitive City in the New Toronto", *Antipode*, pp.227-264.
- Kitchener Social and Economic Working Group. 2008. *Poverty Reduction in Kitchener: Awareness, Advocacy and Action*. Kitchener: Kitchener Social and Economic Working Group.
- Mahon, Rianne. 2006. "Of Scalar Hierarchies and Welfare Redesign: Childcare in Three Canadian Cities", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31, 4, 452-466.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. "Rescaling Social Reproduction: Childcare in Toronto/Canada and Stockholm/Sweden." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29, 2, 341-357.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Laura Macdonald. 2010. "Anti-poverty politics in Toronto and Mexico City", *Geoforum*, 41, pp.209-217.

MacKenzie, Hugh. 2007. *Ontario Budget 2007-2008: A Short Summary of a Budget That's Short on Anything New*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Maxwell, Judith 2003. *The Great Social Transformation: Implications for the Social Role of Government in Ontario*. Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks.

National Council of Welfare. 2006. Poverty Trends by Province.

Ontario 2008. *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*. Toronto: Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2003. *Strong Economic Growth Continues: Ontario's Economic and Revenue Outlook*, Budget Paper A. Toronto: Ministry of Finance.

Poverty Free Ontario. 2011. Overview of a Policy Agenda to Eradicate Poverty in Ontario. <http://www.povertyfreeontario.ca/policy-agenda-overview/> (accessed July 4, 2011).

Shapcott, M. 2003. *State of the Crisis, 2003: Ontario's housing policies are de-housing Ontarians*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario Alternative Budget.

Shields, John and Bryan M. Evans. 1998. *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration "Reform"*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Shillington, Richard and Maureen Fair 2001. *Community Undertaking Social Policy (CUSP) Project*. Toronto: St. Christopher's House.

Sisters of Providence, Kingston Faith and Justice Coalition 2006. *The Grand Experiment and the Great Wall: A Social Audit of the Kingston Community*. Toronto: ISARC. [http://www.providence.ca/justice/isarc\\_report1.pdf](http://www.providence.ca/justice/isarc_report1.pdf)

Social Assistance Review Advisory Council. 2010. *Recommendations for an Ontario Income Security Review*. Toronto: Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Social Planning Council of Sudbury 2008. *Community Strategy to Reduce Poverty in the City of Greater Sudbury* Sudbury: Social Planning Council of Sudbury.

Stapleton, John. 2004. *What Works When Work Doesn't: Income Security Strategies for Working-Age Adults*. Toronto: St. Christopher's House.

TD Economics. 2007. *An Update to TD Economics' 2002 Report On The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) Economy*. Toronto: TD Economics.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *From Welfare to Work In Ontario: Still The Road Less Travelled*. Toronto: TD Economics.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *The Greater Toronto Area: Canada's Primary Economic Locomotive in Need of Repairs* available at: [www.td.com/economics/special/db0502](http://www.td.com/economics/special/db0502).

Toronto Board of Trade. 2003. *The Skills Advantage: Opening Doors for Youths and New Canadians*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Trade..

Toronto City Summit Alliance 2006. *Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults*. Toronto: TCSA.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Enough Talk: An Action Plan for the Toronto Region*. Toronto: TCSA.

The Toronto Star, Tuesday October 2, 2007. "McGuinty vows targets in bid to cut poverty levels: Premier has 'thrown down gauntlet' to other parties with pledge, food bank director says". <http://www.thestar.com/ontarioelection/article/262564>.

United Way of Greater Toronto. 2005. *A Call to Action: A Report of the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force* .

United Way of Greater Toronto. 2007. *Losing Ground: The Persistent Growth of Family Poverty in Canada's Largest City*.

Yalnizyan, Armine. 2007. *Ontario's Growing Gap: Time for Leadership* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

