Three Canadian Campaigns Against Poverty

Marge Reitsma-Street
University of Victoria, Canada
mreitsma@uvic.ca

Abstract

This paper examines narratives of anti-poverty campaigns that emerged in resistance to growing Canadian poverty and inequality. Policy narrative analysis is used to determine the setting, actors, responsibilities and actions in three relatively successful campaigns: a city campaign against a welfare fraud line, a provincial campaign against arbitrary two-year limits on social assistance benefits, and a national campaign to end child poverty. The first narrative states elected government officials are responsible to abolish arbitrary injustices, assist vulnerable citizens and invest in children as citizens of the future. The second narrative speaks to the responsibility of citizens, their civil organisations and government authorities to seek a better society that meets universal human standards. The last narrative is about how to plot strategies and organise campaigns. In this narrative, groups, organisations, coalitions and individuals determine voluntarily and democratically their activities and messages to convince various audiences. Limits and anticipated backlash with these anti-poverty narratives are discussed.

Introduction

This paper begins with a portrait of poverty amid affluence in Canada, followed by a description and analysis of three different types of Canadian anti-poverty campaigns: a community fight to shut down a welfare snitch line in 1996; the provincial movement in British Columbia against the two-year limits on welfare legislated in 2002; and the national campaign to end child poverty by the twenty-first century. The campaigns varied in scope and impact, but each searched for pragmatic and philosophical foundations to guide strategies that recognised and moved against the paradox of growing inequality. Three foundational narratives are proposed.

Each foundational narrative instructs participants, allies and audiences of a campaign to see particular key actors or agents, and what actions they are expected to carry out. These narratives are sketched in opposition or counter to accepted and hegemonic narratives. One narrative claims elected government officials as well as all citizens are responsible to abolish arbitrary injustices, while governments and states are responsible to assist the most vulnerable citizens and invest in children as citizens of the future. Another narrative speaks to the responsibility of citizens and their civil organisations, as well as state agencies, to seek a better society that compares favourably with universal human standards. The last narrative states that groups, organisations, coalitions and individuals determine voluntarily and democratically their

activities and messages; these may vary depending on the audience of their choice. The paper ends by exploring several limits and concerns with these anti-poverty narratives, and what opposition and backlash may be expected.

Canadian poverty, Canadian affluence

The poor have been with Canada for a long time. At the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of white Canadians, and virtually all aboriginal peoples and visible minorities, lived out short lives with minimal income, insecure jobs and primitive health care (Copps, 1974). In the Depression of the 1930s, one in four white men could not find jobs, while women lost their professional jobs as teachers or secretaries upon marriage well into the 1960s. Throughout much of the century aboriginal families lived on poor reserves, while their children were forced to attend authoritarian residential schools far away from home.

By the end of twentieth century the situation improved steadily for most Canadians. The United Nations Development Programme ranks countries on the Human Development Index (HDI). This is a composite measure of life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate and school enrolment, and per capital purchasing power. From 1975 to 2002 Canada improved each year, from 0.869 to 0.939 out of a perfect score of 1.0. Canada consistently ranked among the top five countries along with Australia, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands (UNDP, 2004, p.143). Economic growth, GDP, employment and other indicators favoured by business groups and economists also point to a healthy, robust, prosperous country. Progress is reported on substantial reductions in government debts and deficits.

Despite these measures of progress, poverty has not disappeared in Canada. The Canadian Senate Committee Report on Poverty, Royal Commissions on the Status of Women, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Parliamentary Special Sub-Committees and the National Council on Welfare have rediscovered it repeatedly in the past three decades. Even the United Nations reported that Canada slipped to fourteenth place in 2000 among the OECD and Eastern European countries on the Human Poverty Index, as 12.8% of its population had incomes 50% below median incomes (UNDP, 2004).

There have been fluctuations in poverty rates over the past twenty years, but with the exception of a significant decrease in the poverty rate among seniors, Canadian poverty rates appear stable and consistent. The National Council on Welfare found that the Canadian poverty rate was 16% both in 1980 and in 2000, using the respected independent estimate of low income calculated by Statistics Canada.[1] So too, 15.8% of children under the age of 18 lived in low-income families in 1980; in 1999, 15.6% did so. One in two single mothers (57%) were poor in 1980; the same large proportion remained poor (52%) in 1999. If one uses after-tax rates to calculate poverty, as is done more recently, especially by business and government groups, Canadian poverty rates are lower: 14% in 1996, dropping to 9.3% in 2001.[3] There are other approaches to estimating poverty, such as the United Nations' poverty rate for Canada of 12.8% - calculated by counting people with incomes 50% below the median income.

Whatever poverty rate is used, that of 9.5%, 12.8% or 16% for the year 2000, the Canadian poverty rate is two to three times higher than those of Western European countries. All three rates mean that nearly five million Canadians live on poor, near poor and insecure incomes at the turn of the twenty-first century in the midst of a wealthy, beautiful country replete with water, land, resources and a small population of thirty million. This critical mass of poor and near

poor people encounter difficulties finding adequate housing, eating nutritiously, responding to emergencies, and participating actively in educational and community activities. As one low-income mother in a Canadian research on child poverty so aptly concluded, "[a]t the end of the month there is never enough. I always owe. Always in debt. And worst of all, I cannot give to others" (Child Poverty Research Group, 1988).

There is disturbing evidence that the depth and impact of poverty are getting worse. There is a precipitous drop in the rate of unemployed persons who are eligible to receive federal insurance that they paid into while employed. In 1990, 74% of unemployed persons received insurance benefits, but by 2001 only 39% did so. The number of Canadians claiming welfare or social security income assistance has also dropped significantly from a high of 3,000,000 in 1995 to 1,745,600 in 2003. In 1996, the *Canadian Assistance Plan* was abolished. This federal law had established incentives, funding and principles for services to persons in need. It was not replaced; instead, the federal government may use annual budget legislation to transfer money for provincial social, education and health services with virtually no guidelines, incentives or principles concerning responsibilities to persons in need, unless they are medically ill. Since 1996, almost all provinces have passed new welfare legislation to reduce eligibility and benefits, and to introduce mandatory workfare and more surveillance for fraud and job searches. Welfare benefits calculated in constant dollars have decreased by 20% to 40% in nearly all provinces from 1986 to 2003 for single employables and families, while the costs of housing, food and transportation has increased. Thus, in 1986, one could claim $8,032 if single and employable; in 2003, the total amount had dropped to $6,623. Similarly, in British Columbia, annual benefits for a four-member household in 1986 was $16,679, dropping steeply to $12,556 in 2003 (National Council of Welfare, 2004).

In the last ten years Canadian cities report significant increases in the number of people living in shelters and on the streets, even if employed. Agencies report more children, families and employed people must regularly go to food banks. There are more deaths of people living on the street. The United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development conclude that Toronto has gone into 'decline' since 1990, especially for its low-income citizens. The income gap between the poor and wealthy is growing (Yalinizyan, 2000), as are the number of neighbourhoods in which more than one-third live in poverty (see Lee, 2000; Hajnal, 1995). Even the more conservative group of politicians and bureaucrats that make up the Federation of Canadian Municipalities argue there is a growing income gap between groups of Canadians, despite sustained economic growth in Canada. Furthermore, the introduction of user fees for social, education and recreational services, increases in transportation and housing costs, and stricter eligibility requirements for access to services restrict the capacity of individuals and families on low income from participating in community life as active citizens.

In brief, it is a 'bad time to be poor', concludes the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in a report on the situation in British Columbia (Klein and Long, 2003). Anti-poverty activists argue that 'bashing the poor' (Swanson, 2001) and excluding 'disorderly people' (Hermer and Moserh, 2002) are now acceptable public policies, fostering punitive laws and regulations. Researchers who followed forty-one families in Ontario for three years and statistical trends conclude that Canada's largest province may be booming for some people, but not for others. In 2000, Beznanson and McMurray (2000) conclude that, "[i]nstead of being better off, many households in Ontario are struggling to get by because of fewer job protections, less generous social programs and cuts to social spending" (p. 2).

There are some exceptions to these trends towards more inequality and deeper poverty.

For example, benefits for persons with disabilities have not dropped significantly, while the income of seniors who live in two person households has definitely improved. (Most seniors live in one person households; their income has improved since 1970, but 20% still live on low incomes in 2000.) Statistics Canada reports that some aspects of inequality among families is decreasing. In the national Child Tax Benefit Program, for example, low-income families receive far more child benefits in 2001 through the tax system than do high-income families, while in 1980 high and low income families had received nearly equal levels of child benefits.[5]

Anti-poverty campaigns

There is a stable and significant level of poverty in Canada, and signs that inequality and deepening poverty are increasing. It is not surprising, therefore, that there have been various movements and organisations emerging in the last twenty years to oppose these trends, including Canada's contribution to the World's March of Women against Violence and Poverty, the Metro Network for Social Justice (Conway, 2004), End Legislated Poverty in British Columbia, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (Carroll, 1999; Swanson, 2001) and a unique solidarity campaign in Quebec that has sponsored an anti-poverty law.

The purpose of this paper is to enunciate the foundational ideas of several Canadian anti-poverty campaigns. To ensure rich information for analytical purposes, I selected three campaigns that focus specifically on poverty and welfare issues, but vary in scope, complexity and tactics. One campaign is national, the second is provincial and the third is local. There were no charismatic leaders in these initiatives, nor could I clearly identify any leaders, although in each there were a few people who contributed much time and expertise. None of the campaigns started as a campaign, nor did they begin with budgets or organisations. Another reason for selecting these three campaigns is that, according to the participants and policy makers, they were modestly successful, despite the absence of substantial funds, leaders or organisation. Finally, I have both insider and outsider knowledge of these campaigns. I participated to some degree in each, providing active leadership on particular strategies and activities. Most of the time I observed and wrote for the academic and popular press (e.g. Reitsma-Street and Keck, 1996; Reitsma-Street and Wallace, 2004).

The development of relationships, identity and strategies of the three campaigns are sketched briefly. Each required many people taking time, careful thought, enormous energy and resources to launch initiatives, to maintain healthy relationships with each other over long periods of time, and to combat the inevitable counter-attacks, backlash, and hurts associated with oppositional work. But, analytically and philosophically, the key question, as Walby (2001) asks in her analysis of coalitions seeking equality in an era of globalisation, is: on what 'kind of idea' does one choose to spend that energy and resources? What other kinds of ideas could one select to guide a particular campaign or justice movement? Thus the particular focus in this paper is on the kind of subversive ideas used by the three Canadian campaigns, and what these ideas do and do not do. What imaginings and opportunities were opened by the ideas, and which strategies did those ideas close or ignore?

My particular approach to analysing foundational ideas is a search for narratives, sometimes called key stories. Pierre Bourdieu (1998), in his book *Acts of Resistance*, states how it can take years of "symbolic drip feed" for "something false to become self-evident and seen to be true" (p. 31). He argues that the work of scientists, activists, organisations and citizens is to

speak the truth and to oppose, for example, the false self-evident assumptions that growth, productivity, competitiveness and low taxes are the desired goals of human actions. Bill Carroll, a Canadian sociologist, examines the master narratives used by social movements to explain and plan their strategies to counter the hegemonic or dominant framing of reality (Carroll and Ratner, 1994).

To analyse the counter-narratives that oppose the self-evident stories about poverty and inequality involves an analysis of who are the key actors in a situation, what are the conflicts they encounter, and what approaches are taken to try to resolve the conflicts. These narratives or stories that counter the dominant ones are created by people as a way to make sense of the world they live in, and as a way to imagine the contours of the world they wish to live in. What, then, are the narratives about who should, and could, do something to reduce poverty, and why? After summarising each campaign, I will present three narratives that are common to the campaigns. For each narrative I look at: (1) which actors are responsible; (2) what the actors are expected to do; and (3) what self-evident or dominant narratives they oppose. I will end with some points about the limits of the narratives and the backlash that can be expected.

The national Campaign 2000 to end child poverty in Canada

This is a national social movement that aims to build awareness and support for programmes and policies to end child poverty in Canada. It is a non-partisan coalition that began informally in the mid 1980s and continues to this day. Its first substantial accomplishment was the crafting and engagement of many politicians. Leaders of all parties agreed to submit an all-party resolution to the Canadian federal House of Commons, stating that "[t]his house seeks to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." On 24 November 1989, this resolution was passed unanimously.

Since 1989 Campaign 2000 has worked to secure full implementation of that resolution. Today eighty-five national, community and provincial partners, from faith, service, union, women, immigrant and all segments of not-for-profit organisations, are actively involved in the on-going campaign. Hundreds of additional groups are associated with the work of producing and disseminating regular national, provincial and local report cards. Campaign 2000 participants prepare research reports, press conferences and website updates, engage in public education activities and regular meetings, and lobby and correspond with politicians of all political parties in their work to end child poverty (see the website www.campaign2000.ca)

The material and activities of Campaign 2000 members are bi-directional. One direction is to instruct the public and officials to truly see the situation of high poverty rates among children and its impact, and to inspire moral obligations to end child poverty. The other direction points the public and decision makers to the future, and what solutions are required to end poverty and redress its negative impacts. The solutions have been consistently framed as 'social investment in children'. In the earlier years, there was a call for comprehensive child benefits paid to families, comprehensive childcare and early development initiatives, and youth education endowments. In later years, more structural solutions have been added, including affordable housing strategy and the creation of good jobs with living wages and decent working conditions.

What is the impact of Campaign 2000? Child poverty has not ended in the year 2000. To the contrary: child poverty rates in Canada are exactly the same now as they were when the campaign began. They are still 15% - nearly one-million children live in families with low or

insecure incomes. But Campaign 2000 can boast significant accomplishments. Most significant is the original 1989 all-party resolution passed in the federal House of Commons: it continues to provide a moral and political beacon for what should, and could, be possible in wealthy Canada. Furthermore, child poverty is now accepted as a fact, in most Canadian sectors: after fifteen years of drip feeding reports and facts, the public and politicians reluctantly agree that there is child poverty in this rich country. Moreover, the reduction of child poverty and its impact is clearly on the agenda of national, provincial and local leaders, with action plans proliferating. In addition, substantial programmes and funding have been directed to early childhood education, especially for high risk children.

The most significant change is the implementation of the National Child Benefit in 1998, the first new national social programme in thirty years. The Child Benefit is almost universal, reaching 90% of Canadian families, and replaces older targeted programmes that gave lower benefits. The Child Benefit had been developed by provincial governments and First Nations communities in collaboration with federal bureaucrats and politicians. It is delivered and progressively clawed back through the tax system. In July 2003, $1,169 (or $1,401 if the child is under seven years) was paid to a family for every child if the family income was less than $33,487; the amount is reduced as family increases, and no benefits are given for families with incomes over $80,000. Low income families who earn income through employment, but earn less than $33,000, may also apply for a full or partial supplement of an additional $1,463 paid monthly. Only 'working families', and not families on welfare, may apply for the supplement. The goal of the Child Benefit programme is to invest in children and to give incentives to low income families with adults employed by the market. Federal funding for child benefits has increased significantly when comparing 1989 and 2004 figures.

I cannot argue that Campaign 2000 was responsible for the development and funding of the National Child Benefit. I will argue, however, that without its research educational activities, and continuous pressure, a policy directly geared to child benefits, would not have become a priority. Without Campaign 2000 to End Child Poverty in Canada, and without the National Child Benefit, child poverty would have increased rather than remained the same.

The provincial campaign to abolish two-year limits on welfare in British Columbia

Following is the story of a two-year, partially successful, campaign against arbitrary limits on receipt of welfare in the western province of British Columbia, with a population of nearly four million (see Reitsma-Street and Wallace, 2004). The *Employment and Assistance Act* and its companion, the *Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities*, were passed in June 2002 by the new Liberal government that held seventy-seven out of seventy-nine seats in the legislature. Eligibility, benefits, and access to advocacy and appeals were significantly reduced. Documented proof of being 'truly in need' increased for welfare claimants, as did surveillance of assets and penalties for inaccurate reporting or non-compliance with employment plans. Total benefits were cut by as much as 40% per month, including a 100% claw back of all employment earnings and child support, unless deemed disabled. Parents whose youngest child was three-years old were re-categorised as 'temporary assistance' cases and needed to seek employment. Post-secondary students were no longer eligible to apply for welfare unless disabled, but able to attend full-time studies. Offices and services were closed in dozens of communities. The Income

Assistance Advisory Board was abolished, and the right to appeal denial or reduction of benefits limited. Other policies and programme changes meant most advocacy groups, women's centres, housing registries and community law clinics that offer services to those on low income had their provincial funding reduced in 2002, and eliminated by 2004. Legal aid was virtually unavailable for poverty law or tenant complaints as of January 2002.

The most drastic and qualitatively different changes in British Columbia's welfare new law and regulations were four types of time limits. First, there is the *three week wait* for welfare after making an official application, during which claimants must continue to seek employment, including those caring for children. Second, there is the *two-year independence test*, meaning that applicants, usually youth, must demonstrate they have worked for 840 hours or earned at least $7,000 in each of the two consecutive years before applying, unless disabled, fleeing abuse or caring for children. Third, there is the *two years out of five* eligibility for welfare. Employable persons are to be cut off all assistance after two years of assistance, unless exemptions are permitted by officials, while employable parents who have claimed benefits for twenty-four months, and whose youngest is older than three years, are to have monthly benefits reduced by at least $100. Finally, there is the *lifetime ban on access to welfare for those convicted of welfare fraud*. Unique to British Columbia, however, is its two-year limit to benefits. It is this time limit that became the concentrated focus of public debate and resistance.

Dissent against the various regressive and problematic provisions of the new bills began immediately. Social justice, faith, unions, and some professional and academic groups registered their opposition in the mainstream and alternative media, and provided the two opposition legislative members (out of seventy-nine elected members) with critiques of key provisions for legislative debates. Although all the provisions came into effect in September 2002, the two-year time limit, named the 'ticking welfare clock' by its opponents, started retroactively as of 1 April 2002.

There were numerous sessions, organised by established social justice groups and new coalitions, to analyse the provisions and build oppositional connections across the provinces during 2002 and 2003. Local and provincial research projects were initiated to monitor how the policy changes and funding cuts, including those to welfare, were affecting people and communities. Results were systemically distributed using internet and personal links. Some of the opposition was dramatic and personal when, for instance, the Ministry of Attorney General fired the entire Legal Services Society Board in February 2002 for refusing to implement the elimination of legal aid for poverty law. Conversely, the Law Society of British Columbia passed a motion to censure the Ministry of Attorney General. A similar motion of censure was passed in May 2002 by the British Columbia Association of Social Workers against the Minister of Human Resources, a former social worker.

Opposition to the new laws intensified by Autumn 2003, with a focus on the time limits effective as of 1 April 2004. An estimate of persons facing the cut-offs ranged from 14,000 to 27,000, without appeal, recourse or alternatives. Organisations, large and small, concentrated on lobbying the provincial government and their regional politicians to rescind or abolish the two-year rule. This singular abolitionist focus minimised prolonged debates on non-competing alternatives, such as longer, but still arbitrary, limits of three or five years.

It was the motion approved by the City of Vancouver that galvanised a whole new level of protest. A group of elected reform councillors passed a motion on 6 November 2003 that stated that the City would "actively and immediately lobby the province to rescind the law imposing welfare time, and provide Vancouver community groups with regular updates on their

efforts limits." In addition, the councillors approved a motion to "send a letter to other municipal councils in British Columbia outlining its concerns and urging that other councils lobby the proving to stop welfare time limits." Rapid electronic distribution of this approved motion throughout the activist community, and official letters sent by Vancouver city staff to officials in every municipality across the province, prompted other cities, including those of the City of Victoria and the fourteen municipalities represented by the Capital Regional District, to pass similar motions. Governing bodies of professional groups, such as the Deans and Directors of Canadian Schools of Social Work, the British Columbia Association of Social Work and various school boards, approved similar motions to rescind the time limits, as did social planning councils, housing societies, faith groups and voluntary agencies.

Did the campaign work? Yes and no. This linked, diverse, multi-level, unco-ordinated, but singularly focused, campaign to abolish the arbitrary two-year limits on welfare did capture a measure of positive, albeit fleeting, public support. It was the government who had to defend the limits, and only a few allies came forward to publicly defend the limits. The arbitrariness and inhumanity of the two-year limit captured the public's compassion and imagination. No one knew who would be cut off, nor what would happen to the anticipated hundreds or thousands who could be 'on the streets' without recourse or appeal. Supporters of the campaign to rescind were helped by a real worry that no one claimed responsibility for those cut off welfare. Others were annoyed with the unwillingness of provincial politicians to give information about the impact of the cuts on those most affected - the claimants and their communities.

The time limits, however, have not been abolished. Neither the law nor the regulations on time limits have changed. Yet there is a significant public policy clarification on exemptions. Just five weeks before the 1 April 2004 deadline, when many expected thousands of recipients who had received benefits for two years to be cut off totally and on the streets, a new exemption was announced on 6 February. This new exemption stated that "people who have an employment plan, are complying with their plan, are actively looking for work, and have not been successful in finding employment," could continue to collect benefits. The Ministry of Human Resources argued this exemption was not new, but a clarification of existing policy, and thus there had been no cause for alarm. Opponents of the welfare limits, however, claimed a small victory as all the exemptions, especially this last one, included virtually all persons who are eligible for welfare. Even the mainstream media stated in front-page news items on 7 February 2004 that the "province backs off plan for dramatic cuts to welfare."

Although significant, the victory is small. Public and government debates continue to focus on the importance of employment, and not its adequacy or its relevance to a person's situation. Parenting and care-giving for the sick are not considered work. Without minimal support and maximum surveillance, it will be simple to cut people off welfare for not complying with what the Ministry calls the 'legally binding employment plan.' In addition, the welfare rates are even more inadequate than before the 2002 cuts, pushing people further into debt every month after paying for food and shelter.

Most important, far more people are denied assistance than cut off. With the new laws it is increasingly difficult to become eligible for welfare because of the three-week wait, the two-year independence tests, the assets tests and the higher expectations for documented proof of eligibility. In 2002, 214,516 persons were eligible for assistance, already a significant decrease from a high of 371,427 in 1995, the year before the *Canada Assistance Plan* was abolished and the new *B. C. Benefits* law was proclaimed. Nine years later, only 166, 479 persons were eligible to claim benefits in January 2004, even though unemployment rates, especially for youth or those

with less than university education, have not decreased in British Columbia, while costs of living have increased. The B. C. Ministry of Human Resources continues to argue for a policy narrative that instructs citizens to believe that, regardless of access to adequate employment, childcare, or training, "a job is better than welfare and that people who are able to work should work." To enforce this narrative, punitive measures, such as time limits - with exemptions - are required to lead Canada in "a fundamental shift in the culture surrounding income assistance from one of entitlement to one with a renewed sense of personal responsibility."

Abolition of a welfare snitch line in Northern Ontario

The next and final story is about a local campaign that ended successfully after eighteen months (see Reitsma-Street and Keck, 1996). Welfare snitch lines, also called fraud hotlines or social assistance investigation lines, are dedicated telephone lines introduced to encourage citizens to report cases of suspected welfare fraud to the authorities. The telephone number is widely advertised and featured in phone books. Information may be reported anonymously, and welfare officials follow up the tips.

The District Social Services Administration Board launched a welfare snitch line in January 1994 in a northern Ontario city of 162,000 people, many of them francophone and aboriginal. This line was one component of various new initiatives, against welfare fraud and verification of welfare eligibility, which the province encouraged and funded. The intent of the snitch line was to target opportunists and save millions of dollars. The introduction of the snitch line was given a high profile in the local media through most of the year. Bi-monthly advertisements in local newspapers invited citizens to call and report cases of suspected fraud. "Callers flood welfare snitch line on first day" was the headline in a local newspaper. Other articles featured the names and addresses of those charged with welfare fraud, mostly women. For several weeks, one radio and a television station started their news shows with welfare fraud allegations, and provided updates based on regular press releases from the police.

Initially, the opposition to the snitch line was muted. A coalition of welfare recipients, social justice advocates and artists formed in the Spring, called the Bleeding Hearts Coalition. Media reported their activities, especially the protests and street popular theatre about the myths of welfare fraud. Investigative journalists dug into the difficulties of people falsely accused of fraud, while one community newspaper publicly declared it would no longer print names of those charged with welfare fraud until convictions were confirmed.

Later that year, action heated up following two events: the release of a major local report on child poverty in the region completed by a coalition of established health, welfare, school and social service representatives, and the election of new councillors to the local government. Some councillors were avid supporters of the snitch line; others opposed it. A small *ad hoc* group of people with connections to the aboriginal, legal and social service communities, and who were committed to abolishing the snitch line, started to meet regularly early in 1995.

Four oppositional strategies were pursued in the campaign. First, a conjuncture was created - that is, an opportune moment during which a potential decision could be made, but the outcome was uncertain, and desired options were significantly contested by various groups. The anniversary of the snitch line's installation was chosen for a public review. Second, members of the *ad hoc* group, their friends and colleagues asked their communities to send letters, make calls, prepare briefs and pass motions in their organisations stating their opposition to the snitch line

and requesting the Welfare Board to hold a review. Third, arguments and evidence were developed opposing the snitch line that appealed to different decision makers, including the view that it was inefficient, cost money, falsely accused people and destroyed community trust, which had taken years to build in aboriginal, francophone and other neighbourhoods who lived on low incomes and claimed assistance from local authorities. Finally, once the Welfare Board reluctantly agreed to hold a review, a new flurry of letters, arguments and visits were prepared, including a report that the cause of rising social service costs was not related to welfare fraud. There was another round of articles, letters and debates for and against the line in the print and visual media, including a television poll which indicated that the majority who called in supported the snitch line. In March, the Welfare Board approved a motion, with a narrow majority, that authorised the staff to discontinue the investigation line. For once there was a success and a party. As a coda, however, I reluctantly add that the small success of this local campaign was dwarfed by the subsequent decisions of the provincial government to slash welfare benefits by 21% and to reduce eligibility criteria, making students and mothers of children older than six years ineligible. The provincial government also instituted a provincial snitch line with a toll-free number.

Narratives in the campaigns

Three narratives guiding the actions of actors in the campaigns are summarised in the Table below. In brief, the narratives are: abolish injustice while helping the vulnerable; seek a better society based on universal human standards; and promote voluntary participation that encourages diverse tactics which are appropriate to different audiences.

The first is the most provocative in rhetoric and radical in intent. The narrative is this: our politicians can, should and will abolish injustices and inhumane practices. This narrative states the conflict in the situation is about injustice: there is injustice, and it is wrong. Child poverty is wrong; the two-year limits on welfare is unjust; the welfare snitch line is inhumane. The actors must search for resolutions that abolish the injustice: end child poverty by a certain date; repeal the welfare limits; discontinue the snitch line. This abolitionist instruction is different to narratives such as reducing poverty, extending welfare limits to three or five years, or modifying the snitch line. The other aspect of this anti-poverty story line is that state and government actors are responsible to help vulnerable persons and should invest in citizens. Children living in low income need childcare, early development programmes and financial help; persons with limited income are entitled to income assistance while in need, and should not be harassed by neighbours reporting on them.

Even though politicians and state representatives are among the 'bad guys' who create poverty and inequality, nonetheless, in this first narrative, they are the elected officials, members of parliament, mayors, councillors and civil servants who are expected to take the roles of leading actors and actresses. It is they who are responsible to the people to change the situation. International decision makers are also included as supporting political actors, such as those in the United Nations who monitor the progress of countries that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The messages in the three campaigns presented above were that governments have been elected and are legitimate, significant characters that can, and should, take action to end poverty and arbitrary limits to assistance.

Table. Anti-poverty and dominant narratives in three Canadian campaigns

Anti-poverty narratives	Dominant narratives
Public and elected politicians will abolish injustices. State organisations and representatives will assist vulnerable persons and invest in citizens.	Individuals are responsible for their situation. Officials will monitor, and may help temporarily, the truly deserving who are in need.
The public seeks a better society. The public, states and social services must compare their well-being to universal standards.	Canadians must accept that they are better off than most other countries, and realise that alternatives are too expensive.
Individuals, groups and organisations determine voluntarily how they will participate in campaigns. They will vary arguments and strategies for different audiences.	A co-ordinated central organisation needs strategic plans and a clear hierarchy of authority to make decisions.

The first anti-poverty narrative is contrary to dominant ones that erase the collective deprivations of racism, sexism and class from the context and the specific particularities of an individual's situation. The dominant story is that individuals can, and should be, responsible for themselves and their children, working in whatever jobs they can, and ask family members and neighbours to help mind the children. If a person or head of the household cannot pay the bills, he or she must prove with documents why he or she should be given assistance, and prove his or her continued eligibility and interest in seeking employment and independence. The dominant narrative that is opposed in the anti-poverty campaigns is that people living on low incomes are unproductive and dependent, deserving temporary limited help, surveillance and penalties to prod them into independence and a job.

The second anti-poverty narrative seems more general and obvious. Members of the public are leading actors searching for a better society for themselves and others. They are responsible to imagine what is a good society, and to tackle the barriers that prevent their search. This story line instructs people that they do not have to accept walking over homeless people in the streets. Nor should they pay taxes to support snitch lines that turn neighbour against neighbour, and thereby become another tool for abusive men to hurt their partners. The strength of this type of narrative is that it features leading parts for the public to play; it assumes the public cannot, or should not, be spectators to poverty. They are expected to oppose messages such as: there is no alternative; there is no money in the budget; taxes are too high; and 'the poor you shall have with you always'.

The search for a better world draws upon standards and comparisons. In this part of the story, the public is joined by other actors from the government, civil society and the social

services. All seek standards and comparisons that help end child poverty, close the snitch lines and abolish arbitrary welfare limits. For instance, the welfare snitch line campaigners presented evidence that no money was saved during the year the snitch line operated compared to previous years; also, the economic and community costs for fraud investigations were higher in a city with a snitch line than costs of comparable cities without a snitch line.

The choice of standards is important. The campaigners did not compare poor Canadian children to the billions of children in other countries living in families with less than $2 income per day, but to children who are better off under Europe social policies. Also, those in British Columbia who campaigned against welfare limits refused to use the United States' standard of five year limits on welfare introduced in 1996. Instead, they argued that no other Canadian province or European country had limits on welfare, and that should be the standard for comparison.

In addition, all three campaigns built their resolutions around universal standards of humanity. For instance, faith groups resisted arbitrariness and appealed to unlimited mercy and compassion for vulnerable people. Other groups drew upon the universal human rights written into the Canadian Constitution and international treaties, such as the right to adequate standards of living, including food, clothing, shelter and special protection for children according to provisions in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Both these international treaties have been ratified by Canada. A public interest advocacy group, for example, used these universal standards to launch a constitutional appeal, arguing that the arbitrary two-year limit on welfare is not consistent with people's rights to security and equality as guaranteed by Sections Seven and Fifteen of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada's constitution.

The last anti-poverty narrative provides stage directions about how to organise a campaign. There was no central co-ordinating committee, nor leaders in any of the campaigns, although in each some people and organisations provided significant resources and leadership skills for a time, especially in Campaign 2000. Nor was there a central strategy that members and groups needed to follow or persons in authority to authorise tactics. The search to abolish injustice and introduce universal standards provided direction, as did the focus on particular times, such as the year 2000 or the first anniversary of the snitch line. Individuals, groups and organisations, however, wrote their own plays, starred in their own scripts and voluntarily decided when to engage in a particular activity. Even when I played a leading role in the *ad hoc* group in the local campaign to abolish the snitch line, I did not expect to approve or even know about most of the activities. In the provincial campaign to abolish the two-year time limits, there was an amazing variety of initiatives, mostly unco-ordinated, but singular in focus on abolishing the two-year time limit before the 1 April 2004 deadline, when it was expected that thousands of welfare recipients would be coming to the end of their two years on welfare and be cut off and on the streets. People and groups not only refused to use energy to create a central organisation or strategic plan, but they also insisted on figuring out for themselves what arguments and strategies they could believe in and make sense of for the particular audiences they were trying to convince. Faith groups used prayer vigils on the steps of the legislature and slept on the streets, while municipal politicians passed abolitionist motions and legal groups launched constitutional challenges through the courts.

Discussion points

First, abolition is a bold narrative. It has been used effectively by groups who wish to abolish government debt and those who want to end child poverty. There is pressure, however, to create alternatives. At what point do people need to engage in constructing an alternative narrative - before, at the same time or after a successful abolition? Thomas Mathieson (1974 and 2000), a leading abolitionist theorist, is very clear that the construction of alternatives does not precede the abolitionist work. They are both independent and essential, but one does not wait for the creation of an alternative labour market before abolishing slavery. One does tolerate a specific injustice, whether violence, poverty, a snitch line or time limits on welfare, while waiting for others to create an alternative that is too often but a variation of what already exists.

Second, it is possible that a diverse approach with many opportunities for democratic decisions may work for a time, especially when there is a conjuncture which is either created or seized of a deadline, in which the outcome was uncertain and opposed. But when the deadlines pass, what happens? How to maintain focus, diversity and democracy over the years? And what happens when a particular strategy or argument works in a surprising, undesired manner, contradicting the central intent? In her 2004 book on social movements contesting globalisation, Janet Conway identifies that those most active, committed and visible in a particular struggle shape the tactics and arguments. Social services and professional groups, such as the Teachers Federation, contributed substantial time to Campaign 2000 to end Canadian child poverty, as did some business groups like the Body Shop. They favoured the 'social investment' approach to ending child poverty as a way to appeal to a broad array of allies. But this investment argument emphasises human capital and the future, leaving open the possibility that some children are not worth investing in, and may become disposable. Another concern with the investment strategy is that children are considered social capital and the source of the future well-being of society; they are not seen as persons and citizens who have rights today. The investment approach in an anti-poverty campaign limited the attention to universal rights and caring for children because they are children. A troublesome aspect of Campaign 2000 and the National Child Benefit is its focus on rewarding paid work: those families with adults with employment receive higher supplements than those on welfare.

A third concern is that we need to think more clearly about the role of government. Until I prepared this paper, I did not see so clearly how each of the three campaigns put governments into the leading roles. This choice may speak to people's faith in the legitimacy of public representatives who are democratically elected. But what possibilities are opened up by this focus on these representatives, and what openings are closed?

Finally, the most insidious backlash and opposition to the campaigns was around the notion of deserving and dependency. Very few people want to become poor or take pride in a low income identity, as they may be proud of being Muslim, or black, or aboriginal, or lesbian. Study after study demonstrates that the poor themselves feel they may be an exception and need help, but the majority of other poor people, especially those on welfare, need to be watched as they do not deserve help or manipulate the system. There is a strong desire in each of us to not be poor, to be deserving, to be strong and independent. If we scratch below our surfaces, then I think that many of us also hope to be just a little better off than the person next door. The narratives of deserving and difference are powerful stories which continue to reinforce the dominant narratives, and are the most difficult to counter by anti-poverty activists and allies.

References

Bezanson, K. and McMurray, S. (2000) *Booming for whom? People in Ontario talk about incomes, jobs and social programs*. Ottawa, Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Bradshw, J. and Finch, N. (2003) Overlaps in dimensions of poverty. *Journal of Social Politics*, 32(4), 513-525

Campaign 2000 (2003). *Honouring our Promises: Meeting the Challenge to End Child and Family Poverty*. [online]. 2003 Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada. Available from: www.campaign2000.ca [Accessed 15 September 2004].

Carroll, W. K. and Ratner, R. S. (1994) Between Leninism and radical pluralism: Gramscian reflections on counter-hegemony and the new social movements. *Critical Sociology*, 20(2), 3-26.

Carroll, W. K. and Ratner, R. S. (1999) Media strategies and political projects: a comparative study of social movements. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 24(1), 1-34.

Child Poverty Research Group (1989) *The forgotten cry: child poverty in North Bay*. North Bay Ont., Nipissing University College.

Conway, J. M (2004) *Identity, place, knowledge: social movements contesting globalization*. Halifax, Fernwood.

Copps, Terry (1974) *The anatomy of poverty*. Toronto, McLelland and Stewart.

Hajnal, X. L. (1995) The nature of concentrated urban poverty in Canada and the United States. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 20(4), 497-528.

Harvey, D. (1996) *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Hay, D. I. (1997) Campaign 2000: child and family poverty in Canada. *In*: J. Pulkingham and G. Ternowetsky (eds) *Child and family policies*. Halifax, Fernwood. pp. 116-133.

Hermer, J. and Mosher, J. (eds) (2002). *Disorderly people: law and the politics of exclusion in Ontario*. Halifax, Fernwood.

Klein, S. and Long, A. (2003) *A bad time to be poor: an analysis of British Columbia's new welfare policies*. Vancouver, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Social Planning Research Council.

Lee, K. L. (2000) *Urban poverty in Canada: a statistical profile*. Ottawa, Canadian Council on Social Development.

Mathieson, T. (1974) *The politics of abolition*. Oslo, Universitetsforlaget and Martin Robertson.

Mathiesen, T. (2000) Towards the 21st century: abolition-an impossible dream? *In*: W. B. G. West and R. Morris (eds) *The case for penal abolition*. Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press. pp. 330-356.

National Council of Welfare (2002) *Poverty Profile 1999*. Ottawa, Author.

National Council of Welfare (2004) *Welfare Incomes 2003*. Ottawa, Author

Reitsma-Street, M. and Keck J. (1996) The abolition of a welfare snitch line. *The Social Worker*, 64(3), 35-46.

Reitsma-Street, M. and Wallace, B. (2004) *Resisting Two Year Limits on Welfare in British Columbia*. [online]. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 53, 170-177. Available from: www.povnet.org

Sandoval, C. (2000) *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Swanson, Jean (2001) *Poor-bashing: the politics of exclusion*. Toronto, Between the Lines.

United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development (2002) *A decade of decline: poverty and income inequality in the city of Toronto in the 1990s*. Toronto, Authors

United Nations Development Programme (2004). *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural liberty in today's diverse world*. [online]. United Nations. Available from: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/pdf/hdr04_overview.pdf [Accessed 11 September 2004].

Walby, S. (2001) From community to coalition: the politics of recognition as the handmaiden of the politics of equality in an era of globalization. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 18(2-3), 113-135.

Yalnizyan, A. (2000) *Canada's great divide: the politics of the growing gap between rich and poor in the 1990s*. Toronto, Centre for Social Justice.

[1] Annually, Statistics Canada calculates a relative measure of poverty that varies according to size of household and city, named the Low Income Cut-off. This measure has been used to estimate poverty rates for over twenty years; it reflects an income level at which an individual or family lives in straightened circumstances, spending significantly more of its income on food, shelter and clothing than the average family.

[2] Statistics Canada. *Chapter VIII: Low Income from Analysis of Income in Canada, 2002, PDF version 75-203-XIE*. [online]. Available from: www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/75-203-XIE/00002/part8.htm. [Accessed 13 September 2004].

[4] Bradshaw and Finch (2003) examine various measures of poverty, and argue that it is not safe to rely on any one measure, but on overlapping measures to plan policies and campaigns.

[5] In 1980, the 10% of families with lowest incomes received $1,276 on average in child benefits, increasing to $2,378 by 2000. Conversely, the 10% of families with the highest income had received on average $1283 in 1980, but only $26 by 2000, according to Statistics Canada. See

www12.statcan.ca/english/census, as reported by Michael Prince in a draft chapter - La petit vision, les grands decisions: Chretin's paradoxical record in social policy - for the forthcoming *How Ottawa Spends*. Document received October 2003.