

# Poverty and Injustice: A Gathering Storm

by Paul Creelman

The United States contains one-sixteenth of the world population, yet consumes one-third of the world's resources. Canada has the highest per capita energy consumption in the world, while Turkey cannot afford electricity for eight hours a day.

These enlightening statistics show only the tip of the iceberg, the metaphorical iceberg being the tremendous disparity between the have and the have not nations, a rift which is increasing every year.

The present energy crisis and population explosion may well bring the nation to a global crisis if world resources are not shared in a more equitable manner.

The Club of Rome, an international organization of specialists in many disciplines, predicts global catastrophe by 2025 AD unless we solve the problem

of rationing world food, energy and landscape.

The Club of Rome concluded that neither 'inventions nor conquests by trade or force' could satisfy the needs of all nations. Only a global system of sharing, planned and implemented by an international body can alleviate the prospect of global apocalypse. In a time of OPEC price increases and general recession in the Western world, the prophecy of the Club of Rome was completely ignored. Meanwhile, the thread of life which the peoples of Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sahel, East Africa so painfully extract from the soil has come to the breaking point. People in these types of third world countries cannot afford, even on a national scale, to import food. If a drought occurs, the people starve.

The desperation of many of the poor countries is beyond question. Now that countries

like Pakistan, Brazil and Argentina have the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons, the potential for nuclear blackmail retaliation must be seen as a very real possibility.

If an over-zealous group of revolutionaries, in, say El Salvador were to carry their process one step further and blackmail the Western world with a home-made nuclear weapon, the resultant crisis might very well fulfill the Club of Rome's expectations.

*Poverty in Canada is real. Its numbers are not in the thousands, but in the millions. There is more of it than our economy can afford, and far more than existing measures and efforts can cope with. Its persistence, at a time when the bulk of Canadians enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world, is a disgrace....*

This statement by the Economic Council of Canada in 1966 sums up the problem of poverty in our nation. The need for the control of this poverty is greater now than ever before,

and if we want to solve the problems of our society and move towards a just society, it is going to be necessary to eradicate the poverty which directly contributes to crime, disease, poor education, and social unrest caused by gross inequality.

The latest figures by Statistics Canada show that in 1977 about 14 percent of the population of Canada lived on an income which was below the poverty line, an increase of 1.2 percent over the previous year. In other words, more than one in ten Canadians lives in poverty, and the numbers of the poor are constantly increasing.

Who are the poor? The answer to that question depends largely on your point of view. Poverty is not just an economic condition. For instance, a fisherman in the

Atlantic provinces may have an income far below the poverty line, yet because he can be his own boss, live by the sea, and work outdoors, be relatively contented with his life. In comparison, a poor man in the slums of Montreal could have a higher income, yet experience the despair of being trapped in poverty which is peculiar to large slum districts. It is a statistical fact that the lowest income groups in the Atlantic provinces are less likely to consider themselves as being poor than those in the same income group who live in Central Canada. It is the defeat, the alienation and the pain of poor health and bad housing which we are trying to alleviate, and it is in many respects just as much of a sociological problem as an economic one.

The reasons why the poor stay poor can be attributed in large part to the structure of Canadian society. Leaving aside the small proportion of the poor who just don't want to work (approximately two percent by the latest studies), there is undeniable evidence for the class structures which keep the poor in their place.

A study of a poor area in Montreal in 1966 showed a number of vicious cycles in the maintenance of poverty. Those in the two lowest income groups had either no education or grade school education. It seems pretty likely that these low income groups would have trouble financing the education of their children, who would be unable to get a good job because of their poor education, and be unable to finance the education of their children.... The cycle is self sustaining, and tends to keep this community poor regardless of any individual's abilities.

Ethnic origin, disease, and mental health were also shown to have significant correlations with income levels, and could give rise to cycles similar to that described for education above.

"The culture of poverty" is a term which has come to be used to describe this self-limiting aspect of poverty.

Of course, it is not only the culture of the poor which keeps them where they are. The Goldfarb studies show that the average Canadian, when given a random list of adjectives to choose from, is more likely to consider the poor as being lazy, thriftless, and irresponsible, with alcoholics and drug addicts close contenders. This gives us a pretty accurate picture of the Canadian psyche. William Ryan's book *Blaming the Victim* sums up this train of thought by contending that society blames the plight of

the poor on the poor themselves, even though the only solution lies in the reordering of society itself.

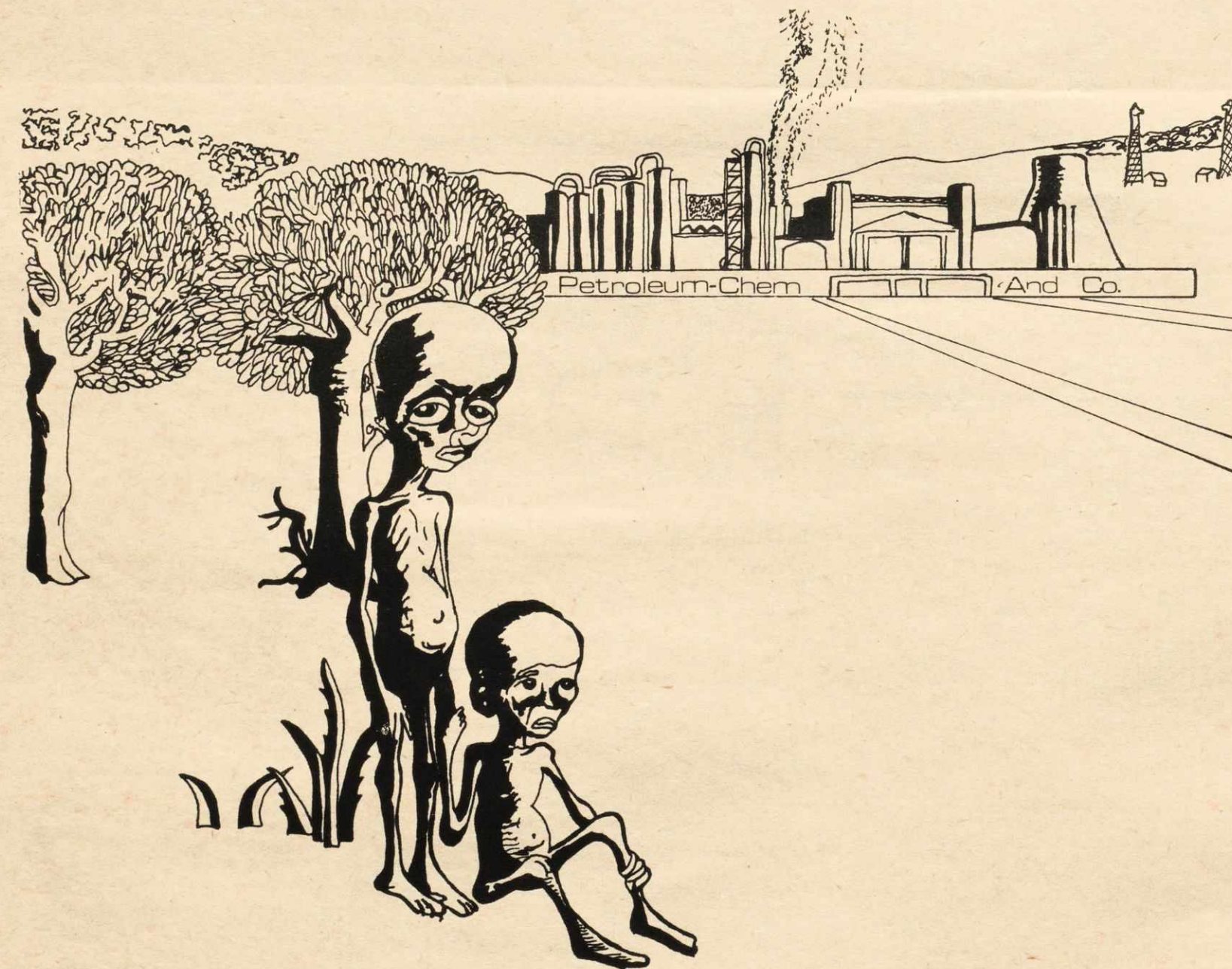
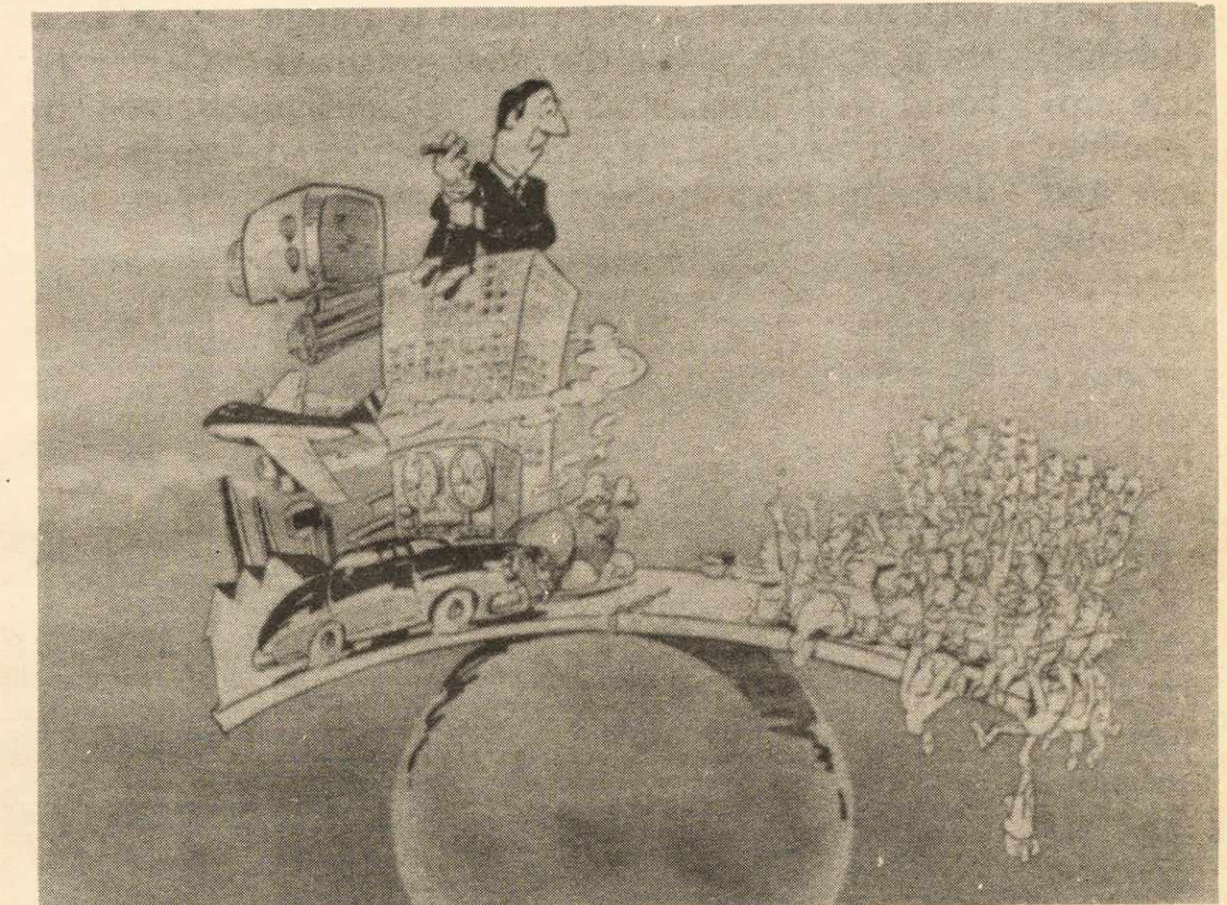
Now that the problem of poverty in Canada has been accurately defined, what can be done about it? This is a difficult question to answer, but the need for a solution is becoming more imperative every year.

The concept of guaranteed annual income is one solution which has been gaining considerable momentum lately. The idea is basically simple—if a family has an income below a certain predeclared standard, then they are paid the difference by the government. It is, in effect, a negative income tax. The benefits of this concept are immediately apparent—poverty is virtually eradicated, and no one need suffer doubts of where their next meal is coming from. However, this system is also monumentally inefficient, because the existence of the net income floor effectively removes all monetary motivation for work. Why should anyone work for a living when they can get it for nothing? In actuality, of course, most people like to work just for the sake of working, but there is always a significant portion of the population eager to freeload at the expense of the taxpayer. Also, the massive expenditure required for this

program makes it impractical in today's political climate. Any government which tried to raise taxes by 25 percent in order to finance such a program would not remain the government for long.

Another approach is advocated mainly by the sociologists who thought up the 'Culture of poverty' idea. Since the condition of poverty is largely maintained by the structure of society, they reason, the only way to solve poverty is to change the society itself. Precisely how they propose to do this it is impossible to discern, as no one has yet worked out a practical scheme of action from the theories.

It can be seen, then, that there is no easy solution to the problem of poverty. A purely economic solution is too expensive, and a purely sociological approach has not yet been perfected. However, we must find a compromise of these extremes, not only to move Canada ahead into a better future, but to help us find a solution to the much more difficult problem of global disparity.



Twenty years ago in Cuba, the wealth of the nation was centered in Havana. Under the Batista dictatorship, the undeveloped rural areas were virtually ignored by the government, which was generally only interested in the profits generated by the agricultural sector. (At this time sugar was, as it still is, the main export of Cuba.) The difference between the rich and the poor was appalling. In Havana, the wealthy and the aristocracy of the civilized world attended luxurious night spots and gambling casinos, while the poor lived in the slums. Outside of Havana (and the other large cities, mostly provincial capitals) the wealthiest of the rural peasants was only as well off as those in the city slums, while the majority of the workers had no hospitals, no sewers, and certainly no hope of bettering their conditions.

Cuba was obviously ripe for revolution, and the leadership of Fidel Castro had widespread and extremely strong popular support.

Putting aside political differences, the situation of the

people of Cuba improved markedly after the Revolution. For instance, in 1959, the illiteracy rate in Cuba was 60 percent in the rural areas, and 23.6 percent in Havana, while in the post revolutionary period it dropped to 3.9 percent.

Cuba is also very much better off than its Latin American neighbors, according to Dr. Kirk of the Spanish department at Dalhousie.

"Cuba must always be considered not in relation to countries like Canada, but relative to its Latin American neighbors" says Dr. Kirk, who is teaching a new course on the history of the Cuban Revolution at Dal.

If Cuba is seen in this perspective, one can see the tremendous job that it has done with its economy, according to Dr. Kirk.

He continued to point out that while the average Cuban doesn't have a very large income, he is nonetheless affluent because his food and housing expenditures are controlled by the government, leaving a large portion of income for other uses.

Perhaps a lesson can be learned from Cuba when considering the problem of economic disparity. Even the political connotations of the Cuban Revolution have started to fade because of the recent relaxation of the immigration laws, thawing relationships with the U.S., and, according to Dr. Kirk, an increasing decentralization of the government.

This decentralization, which has just taken place in the past few weeks, is seen as a definite positive move by Dr. Kirk. If these changes in the structure of the Cuban government could be construed as a shift away from the left to a more moderate style of government, then Cuba may have a politically feasible as well as socially viable solution for poverty to show the rest of the world.

