

Editorial

Poverty can be fun; ask any of the 11 Senators who visited Halifax last week. They flew in complements of Air Canada for a three day all expense paid vacation in Canada's Ocean Playground, ate and slept in one of Halifax's finest hotels, sipped sherry with the best of society, and as an afterthought listened to the poor of Halifax from their perch on stage in the McInnes Room.

It was all part of a four city tour called the Senate Committee on Poverty and though once in a while played to packed houses, generally the critics panned it as a poor show.

The only problem was that although the Senators knew their lines by heart, the poor flubbed theirs. They forgot to address the Chairman as "Mr. Chairman" forgot to say "thank you sir" effusively whenever a Senator deigned to talk to them, and generally forgot to be deferential to those great white fathers who had taken time from their busy schedules to come and listen.

The analogy with the touring sideshow is apt, for in reality, it was nothing more than amateur theatrics. It was created essentially to provide comic relief for the poverty-stricken, a little brightener for their otherwise humdrum existence. They had seen it all a thousand times before, but the show was usually worth a laugh, so they came to talk about the problem, to vent their passions, and then go back to the third floor walkup they call home, knowing that they had done what they could to solve the problem of poverty.

The Senators, meanwhile, came overflowing with the milk of human kindness, to hear the same sad stories again, to cry the tears of the paternal, to go back and write their masterful and literary report, knowing that they had done what they could to solve the problem of poverty.

It is, in the jargon of the social scientist, a "cathartic release", emotional draining of the spirit

in which all the participants gain spiritual relief. But the problem of poverty is not spiritual, it is economic, something forgotten by the Senators. This time, however, the poor did not forget.

Finally, they became tired of another in the long line of committees designed to inspect and dissect them. They lashed back with a fury that took the senile ladies and gentlemen of the Senate by surprise. The Senators were frightened and they answered back in the only way they knew how - they cut short the question period, refused to go to where the poor lived to see and to talk with the real poor (the ones who never go to Senate hearings), drank their fine sherry, and talked of their concern for their fellow man.

It all began on the second day of the hearings with the presentation of a joint brief from the Tenants Protective Association and the Neighbourhood Centre. It was just a film, technically speaking a poor film, but one with impact. The film hit the Senators in their collective solar plexi - it told them to go to hell.

The poor and those who work with them were seen, in the videotape, discussing the Senate Committee on Poverty and what they expected from it. "A sop... window dressing... a farce... a joke..." These were some of the terms that the poor used to describe this aggregation of aging Senators from Ottawa and their nice Committee.

The Senators should not have expected otherwise; their *raison d'être* is tenuous at best. They were the creation of the Economic Council's Fifth Annual Review; which suggested that possibly it might be a neat project for the Senate to conduct an investigation into the problem of poverty in this land of affluence. The only difficulty was that the Council had already done the work - they had isolated the problem. People were poor, too many of them. That was the problem, the statistics were all there.

There were even multitudinous recommendations left over from the sundry other committees that had already investigated the problem.

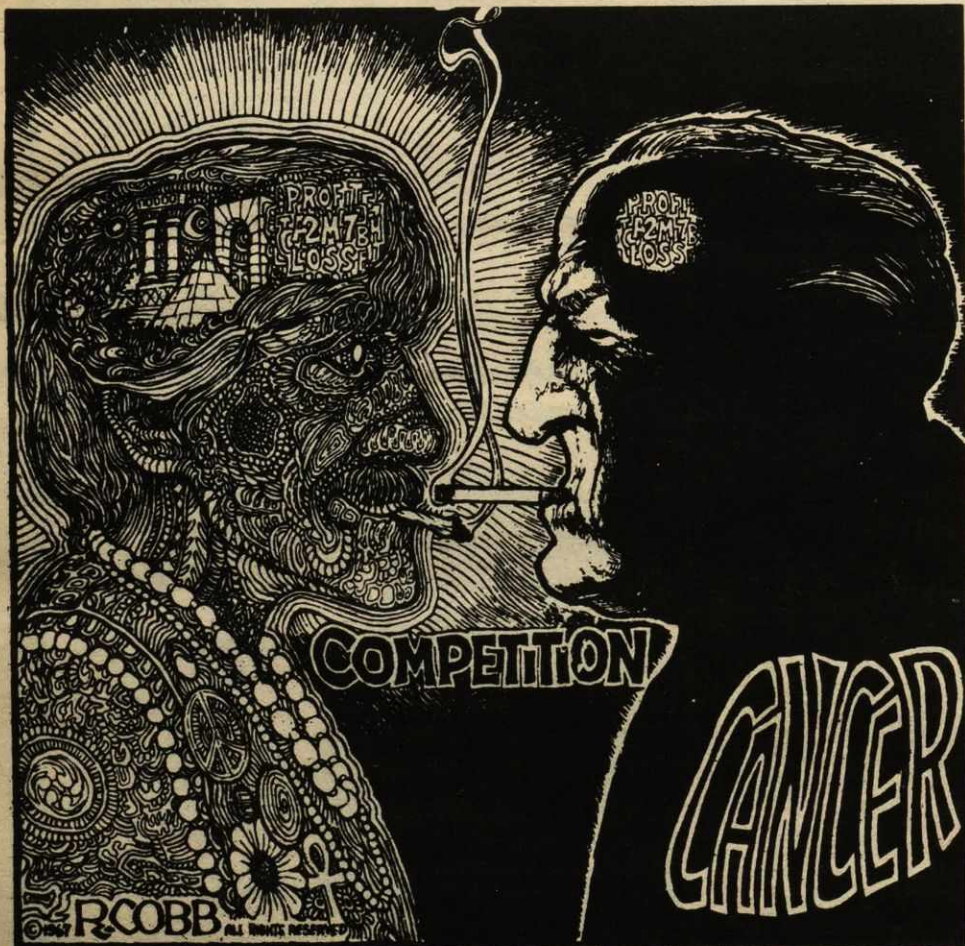
So why the committee? Well, it seems that the recommendations the Government had were all unpalatable, for they mostly saw the problem as one of human dignity, of guaranteeing people the right to an adequate standard of income, housing, and education.

For some unknown reason, these solutions did not find favor, and besides the Senators weren't doing anything anyway. Thus the Senate's Special Committee on Poverty under the esteemed Chairmanship of Senator David Croll...

Senator Croll, of course, has had some difficulty adjusting to the fact that poor people are unused to addressing him with proper respect and that they are not entirely taken in by his Committee. He became so petulant at one point that he cut off questions from the floor with more than a dozen hands still waiting to be answered. He couldn't get along with the men from the media and even refused to allow them to ask questions after the hearings. He also became so peeved with the poor that he refused to go and talk with them in their own environment.

And then they were gone. A cursory look at the academics of poverty, a tearfilled eye now and again, and off again to another nice hotel with more drinks and fireside chats about the depression.

The Senators are gone but the truth goes marching on. Poverty still exists - the mere coming of the Senators, unlike the hand of Jesus, did not wash away the poverty of the masses. Back in their red carpeted chambers in Ottawa, the Senators will write their manifesto for curing poverty, but the affliction will continue, because when it came down to the crunch, the Senators, in the words of a public housing tenant "didn't give a damn..."



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