

GOVERNMENT AND POVERTY

Mr. Maurice Sauvé, the Minister of Forestry, recently addressed the Founding Conference, University of Toronto Centre for Industrial Relations, in Toronto. The following is a partial text of his remarks:

During the rise to affluence of our society, we have developed programmes which might be called social-insurance or social-security programmes (and one could name a dozen or so categories) which ensure that all, or nearly all, of the population will have at least a minimum of the basic necessities — food, clothing, shelter and elementary medical care. Therefore, it would be possible to deny that poverty exists in Canada because, by traditional definition, the condition of poverty consists of lacking basic necessities.

However, according to the standards of this society, people may be considered poor even though their income provides much more than the basic necessities. If, for any reason, people are prevented from enjoying a reasonable level of security, comfort and amenities, they are considered poor. And since our society is generally humane as well as affluent, poverty has become a matter of political significance.

It is not, I think, that the poor generally recognize their condition to be a direct responsibility of the society, we are too steeped in the philosophy of individual free enterprise for that. It is that their champions recognize that the condition of the poor is now, in this era of automation, attributable to maladjustment of socio-economic organizations. It is these theorists, these disturbers of the traditional concepts, who function as the conscience of society and thus place the onus on the politician in an increasingly direct and forthright way....

...I should like to describe poverty in real, substantive terms as it exists in rural Canada in 1965. Earlier this year, the Department of Forestry, through its ARDA Administration, commissioned a study on rural poverty. The study was done by the Canadian Welfare Council and included actual case studies of poverty in four regions of Canada — one in Nova Scotia, one in Quebec, one in Ontario and one in Manitoba. This was a pilot study, and not a particularly large and elaborate one, but it was done by competent people and we may assume that their descriptions of what they found are objective. I shall attempt, in as concise a way as possible, to acquaint you with the findings of this study — to sketch poverty as it actually is, here and now, in Canada.

A POOR CANADIAN FAMILY

The typical poor family in these four rural areas consists of parents and five children. The father works at a combination of self-employment — it may be a bit of farming, fishing or woodwork — and part-time wage employment. The income is, in many instances, supplemented by welfare payments or unemployment insurance in addition to the family allowance. Even with this, the *per capita* monthly income is \$28. We might note that the assumption

underlying the minimum wage is that about \$50 is a necessary monthly *per capita* income.

The housing conditions of these families are described as poor in the majority of cases. Many of them lack running water and have no inside toilet facilities; foundations, if they exist, are faulty; windows are broken or lacking, the roof leaks, there is no insulation. One not unusual illustration describes a house, built in 1964, of used planks and old wood retrieved by the head of the household from the dump. Everybody — and there are eight children in addition to their parents — sleeps in one furnished room.

The life chances of the children in these families are poor. Medical care is either expensive, too far away or the facilities are inadequate. And the opportunity to participate fully in the educational process is hampered by such seeming trivialities as lack of clothing, no place to do homework, no books at home, and fatigue associated with poor food. Occupational opportunities are limited partly by inadequate education and training and partly because jobs are not available. Parents see little or no future for their children in their home areas. Such jobs as are available are often seasonal and the wages are low. The capital requirements of modern farming are prohibitive for persons whose expenditures in seven out of ten cases exceeds their incomes.

These families exhibit a courage one must admire in facing conditions which they see no possibility of changing. It is not that they do not wish to change, but they perceive no realistic possibility of doing so. Some have tried and it hasn't worked — their skills, their orientation toward how things should be done, their lack of experience in coping with urban industrial situations — all these trap them in a socio-economic dead end....

We face a most peculiar conundrum. It is politically safe — even politically desirable — to wage a massive frontal attack on poverty. We have the productive capacity — the financial means — of doing so. Almost no skilled men are unemployed. We have an able and responsible civil service, both at federal and provincial levels. The census of Canada, the great surveys of natural resources, and thousands of individual research programmes, both rural and urban, provide us with nearly all the information we need. Why in this situation does poverty persist?...

WHY POVERTY PERSISTS

There is no simple answer to this question. In fact, we all know there are many answers. But I feel bound to try and identify the weakness which I said I had sensed in government programmes. And I know as I do this that there is a risk of appearing to oversimplify.

The actual organization and structure of the civil service has evolved as a group of many hundreds of individual agencies, and each agency has limited, specialized functions. Thus each agency can relate its activities to only a limited facet of the life of