

# Poor people's conference:

**"They (federal government sponsor) should be happy with the results, because a lot got done."**

"We have no control over our government. We are under American domination," Ann-Marie Gold, a St. Catharines delegate to the Poor People's Conference, said in one of the general sessions Friday!

"We recognize," a Toronto delegate said, "that it is the big corporations, mostly foreign-owned, that influence our government's decisions."

These comments, which met with loud approval, typified the realistic pessimism, anger and surprisingly shrewd insight of many of the more than 450 delegates to the government-sponsored, four-day conference at the Lord Simcoe Hotel last weekend.

The conference was clearly an attempt — the first of its kind — to provide some sort of cohesion and common purpose to over 200 diverse and basically powerless groups representing a broad spectrum of Canada's poor (estimated by some sources as high as six million or 30 per cent of the population — and certainly no less than four million — below acceptable living standards). Although most of the representatives were from urban areas, no major low or non-income group was left out except one — unionized workers.

When asked about this, Peter Robinson, chairman of the Planning committee, said this group would be included in future, but it was impossible to choose certain unionized delegates without charges of discrimination. Union representatives simply do not always fit into the "low-income" category.

The conference itself was organized in the form of "flexible" workshops — informal group discussions on police and courts, money, unemployment, politicians and other problems facing the poor. The conclusions, if any, were then presented at the general sessions. No "experts" like sociologists, social workers or politicians were allowed into either the workshops or the general sessions — without doubt the finest decision made by the planners.

As Peter Robinson said in an interview Tuesday: "the people didn't need any person to analyse their problems for them"

These problems were discussed at great length in the workshops, but — as might be expected — severe criticisms of the treatment of the poor — by governments, police, business, and even the establishment press which was barred from all but the general

sessions — also arose.

"Does anyone know of an instance when a poor person has been given a fair trial in this nation?" asked Alex Bandy, spokesman for the radical wing and co-chairman of the general sessions, and who has changed his name several times because "the law's after him."

Conflicts among delegates and even splits between groups occurred when conference resolutions were drawn up Sunday. But no one disputed the criticisms raised throughout the meetings, except perhaps a small group (including this onlooker) who felt they were — if anything — too mild.

As an example take Margaret Mitchell, Unemployed Welfare Workers Society rep., who reported on the federal government's attitude: "This conference is a \$50,000 public relations job for the government. . . We do not believe the government is truly interested in poverty."

At first glance this conclusion seems ridiculously obvious and far too kind. But it must be remembered that government at all levels has perpetrated a fantastic fraud. Politicians and businessmen have conned Canadians for years into thinking that poverty of some sort is unavoidable; they have even managed to convince many that they're doing the best they can. Thus any conclusion to the contrary has to be considered a step in the right direction.

Before examining the results of the conference, some further criticisms, not mentioned in the daily press, deserve attention.

Dahn Batchelor, Fortune Society, on the attitude of police who, he says discriminate against the poor: "They search our homes like they're looking for a million dollars."

Poor people usually don't know their rights and the police take full advantage of this. In effect, there's virtually a permanent, though unmentioned and unofficial, "Police Act" in terms of the freedoms the police have in dealing with the poor.

Batchelor detailed the problem of bail — especially for material witnesses — which can never be raised and fines which can rarely be paid.

One delegate mentioned — with ample justification — the "poor reporting in the dailies" which "harmed" the conference at the beginning.

Press distortion is such a serious problem for these people that,

originally, reporters were to be barred from even the general sessions — a decision only reversed after much heated argument.

"The fact that they were so antagonistic," Robinson said, got people wondering if they really needed the press there at all.

"For the first time, people didn't take the press for granted." People had always assumed the press had to be at a conference and that usually ended the matter. But the Poor People's Conference set a lot of precedents and destroyed a lot of assumptions, Robinson, Ryerson student, said.

Even after the press was admitted, more emphasis was placed on the "awe-struck" behaviour of the delegates in the luxurious Lord Simcoe than on the vital issues, an orientation which was mercifully changed by the end of the conference.

One Friday press headline, which said something about the brisk bar activity, really angered delegates. "That kind of incident is similar to the kind of reporting we were getting before," Robinson said.

The headline (in the Globe) was a stupid mistake and quickly changed, according to a reliable source who said the reporter was not to blame. Maybe so, but the damage was already done. After all, how many people buy two editions of the same paper on the same day.

Despite the expected cleavages, antagonisms and purely organizational problems, a surprisingly significant list of resolutions was passed before the conference broke up. The most important in terms of future action were: the formation of a national committee to serve as the first co-ordinating body representing the various local poverty groups; the decision to hold demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts January 25; and the plan to start a national poverty newspaper, essential if communications links are to be forged. (At present, a number of small papers are put out, primarily in the urban areas, but their readership is generally very small.)

Other resolutions dealing with a wide range of reforms were passed. Both these and some radical declarations not dealing with poverty were well covered in the dailies.

But one resolution, dealing with the need to control foreign influence, was not mentioned.

Peter Robinson, from a small Caribbean island, said: "I've seen the extent to which foreign investment can screw a country up."

The poor are gravely affected by the Americanization problem, a fact made strikingly clear by the literature of certain poverty groups.

A west coast unemployed workers paper, The Resistance, details the plight of B.C. workers: "The canneries we had . . . are almost all of them gone. . . Now we import most of our canned food." Foreigners like General foods, IGA and Safeway (a giant supermarket chain) are, they say, buying up the food production sector of the economy.

A similar situation exists here where the decision of a corporate giant in Cleveland can determine a person's working future. Most people at the conference seemed to agree that both the federal and to a greater extent — the provincial governments are under strong "foreign" influence.

In a wide-ranging interview, Peter Robinson condemned the Trudeau government, universities, and business as well as foreign influence.

"Trudeau," he said, "still applies the old approach to poverty," but "it's (federal gov.) given a lot of talk." He suggested that "maybe there should be a task force on wealth instead of poverty."

In discussing the efforts of the poor, Robinson stressed that "It must be given some direction." Leadership and a sense of purpose with recognizable goals are essential, not just vague hopes.

"I had a lot of hopes for it," Robinson, a key organizer, said. The conference exceeded even his expectations, though: "They (federal gov. sponsor) should be happy with the results, because a lot got done."

Robinson had fewer kind words for universities, though.

They are "sorry, sad institutions," he said, with people who "isolate themselves and pretend to be so much more knowledgeable than anyone else."

A great achievement of the conference was the "tremendous absence of intellectuals." But Robinson admitted that "certain assistance will be needed" from resource people later.

He also stressed the need for real community involvement. Students and other members of York's community "should be involved in the January 25 demonstrations, just as a gesture of solidarity."

By BRIAN MILNER