

**Office of the
Provincial Advocate
for Children and
Youth**



*Bureau de l'intervenant
provincial en faveur des
enfants et des jeunes*

March 31, 2008

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A2

Dear Stephen Harper:

We are writing on behalf of the 778,000 children in Canada who live in poverty. Our country is rich in resources, we have experienced high levels of economic growth and yet we have failed to implement strategies to provide the support desperately needed by some of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

In 1989, a resolution was passed in the House of Commons with all-party support, promising the elimination of poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000. It is now 2008 and as Campaign 2000's recent Report Card on child poverty points out, the after-tax poverty rate is still 11.7%, *exactly the same as it was in 1989*.

Dr. K. Kellie Leitch was appointed in 2007 as Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth by the federal Minister of Health, Tony Clement. In that capacity, Dr. Leitch was recently commissioned by the Minister to prepare a report on the health of Canada's children titled "Reaching for the Top". Although Dr. Leitch's report is focused on the health of children, she indicates that poverty is "*a key social determinant of health*" and points out the high correlation between poverty and health-related issues for children.

In her report Dr. Leitch also notes that Canada has both the resources and the capability to be the number one place for children to grow. Instead, Canada lags behind in 12th place out of 29 industrialized countries as indicated in research on child well-being carried out by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

In 1991, Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, committing to “*recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental spiritual moral and social development.*” The Report of the Senate’s Standing Committee on Human Rights released in April of 2007 and titled “Children: The Silenced Citizens” noted “*that consecutive federal governments have not kept the promises that were made upon ratification.*” The report goes on to state, “*At the ground level, children’s rights are being pushed to the side and even violated in a variety of situations – one only needs to take a brief survey of the issue of child poverty, or the situation of Aboriginal or special needs children to realize that this is true.*”

Today our senior population is rapidly expanding and with the retirement of the “baby boomers”, we will need our next generation to be well educated and fully prepared to take on the significant challenges facing our country. We cannot afford to leave behind hundreds of thousands of our children. Research has also shown that every dollar invested during childhood is worth 3-18 dollars later in life in savings. Resolving the issue of child poverty is both a moral and economic imperative.

In Canada, while we have been very strong on rhetoric, we have lacked the commitment to set specific goals, timeframes and to allocate resources. A new approach is needed and we challenge you as Canadian leader to fulfill Canada’s promises to its children and prepare a strong and effective group of citizens for our collective future.

There are many reports available that provide clear pathways towards the goal of addressing child poverty. What appears to be lacking is the political will to make and implement a long term and sustainable plan.

A major step in this direction would be the establishment of an independent children’s commissioner at the federal level. This office could provide leadership in developing and overseeing a long-term initiative to eradicate child poverty. We call on you to create this position and place Canada in a leadership role with regard to the care and development of its children.

The issue of child poverty should become a priority. The future of our children is too important. In 2008, one in six children and youth live in poverty. That represents over a million young people. We must all be involved in finding solutions to this shameful situation.

As Prime Minister of our country, we ask that you move away from short-term solutions and unfulfilled promises and implement a strategic plan that will ensure that all Canadian children have the opportunity to become participating and contributing citizens.

The Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates

Copies to all other party leaders.