

EDITORIAL

Tackling child poverty

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It has been a decade of prosperity for many Canadians, given the country's relatively low unemployment rates, booming corporate profits and hefty government surpluses.

Unfortunately, the child poverty rate in Canada remains far too high.

In fact, the rate is 11.7 per cent, unchanged from where it was in 1989 when the House of Commons voted unanimously to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000.

Despite a \$13 billion federal surplus in the last fiscal year, Canada has made absolutely no progress in meeting that goal.

The dismal news was revealed last week in the latest income figures released by Statistics Canada, which show a total of 788,000 children were living in poverty in 2005.

At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen. The difference in after-tax income between families in the top fifth and those in the bottom fifth has risen from \$84,500 to \$105,400 in just nine years.

And the average after-tax income of the wealthiest families was \$128,200 in 2005, compared to only \$22,800 for the poorest.

In addition, the report found that the poorest Canadians still have incomes significantly below a standard of living generally considered adequate for the size of their family.

Those dismal numbers highlight the fact that market forces alone will never eradicate poverty. In Canada's case, a rising tide of overall economic prosperity is not lifting all boats.

What is needed to overcome this national disgrace is for Ottawa to develop a national poverty reduction strategy, complete with firm targets, timetables and funding commitments to meet them.

Such a strategy has been proposed repeatedly by many anti-poverty experts and last week by the Senate committee on human rights.

The Senate noted that Canada ranks 22nd among 26 wealthy nations in terms of children living in relative poverty.

Such appalling results will continue until Canada develops the political will to tackle this issue.

A targeted strategy to end poverty particularly among children works, as shown by countries such as Ireland. For example, the United Kingdom set out in 1999 on a 20-year mission to end child poverty in phases, with an ultimate goal of cutting it in half by 2010. It remains on target to meet that objective.

Here in Canada, Quebec and Newfoundland have each developed successful poverty reduction plans.

What is clearly needed is for the federal government, in conjunction with the provinces, to develop a similar strategy to fight child poverty.

Politicians from every national party should unite in making such a battle a national priority.

Our children deserve no less, because a high child poverty rate was not acceptable 18 years ago – and it is not acceptable today.