



**Statement made at the UPR-Info.org Pre-Session for Canada's UPR 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, to delegates of the United Nations and Canadian Non-governmental Organizations.**

**Delivered by Harriett McLachlan, Canada Without Poverty Board President, and Megan Yarema, Director, Education & Outreach for Canada Without Poverty.**

Good morning delegates, members of the Canadian government, and fellow NGO colleagues. My name is Harriett McLachlan, and I am the Board President for Canada Without Poverty. I appreciate the opportunity to speak here about pressing issues facing vulnerable populations in Canada, and would like to thank Roland Chauville and the staff of UPR-Info.org for organizing this session.

Canada Without Poverty is a national charitable organization governed by a Board of Directors who have experienced poverty first-hand. I myself have lived in poverty for 34 years. I have a master's degree and have been a social worker for over 20 years. I am an example of our broken social safety net. On many, many occasions I did not eat because I had to make certain to pay rent. For over 10 years, the only housing I could afford was uninhabitable with rats in my living space, my kitchen and in the beds of my children even. Poverty has taken a heavy toll on my physical and mental health, poverty has cost me a great deal.

I live in a rich country and yet millions are struggling in poverty, with inadequate housing, or going hungry because the Canadian Government makes choices to maintain poverty.

In this country of great wealth, close to 900,000 people in Canada use Food Banks every month because they have no other way to feed themselves. Poverty is even more desperate in our Northern Territories where the cost of food and housing is outrageous - \$13 USD for a jug of milk.

Our social support system keeps people poor. Welfare rates are well below any measure of poverty in Canada. In Vancouver a single mother of 2 children receives just over \$1,000 each month and yet the average rent for a 2 bedroom apartment is over \$1200 a month. Overall, welfare rates would have to be 48% higher just to keep people out of poverty.

The lack of national standards and less money from the federal government means a piecemeal response at the ground level. While some regions have developed poverty strategies (none of which are informed by human rights), others have not and the results speak for themselves: between 3 – 4 million people in Canada are living in poverty overall. At least 250,000 people are visibly homeless and another 1.5 million remain housing insecure.

Our government is more concerned with PROFITS than with PEOPLE. This is ironic given that it is now well accepted that solving poverty in Canada would cost **LESS** than maintaining it.

As Leilani said, we appear here before you at considerable professional risk, but we do not believe the voices of poor people should be silenced just because we think the government can and should do better.

5. Megan Yarema, will now give you a brief overview of the 2009 UPR recommendations on poverty made to the Canadian government, and will speak to what the government has done over the past four years to implement these recommendations. We will end with concrete recommendations that should be put forward to address the growing crisis of poverty, homelessness and hunger.

6. Thank you Harriett.

Canada Without Poverty has presented at the CESCR and also made a submission for Canada's upcoming UPR in collaboration with the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation.

During Canada's 2009 UPR a number of countries made recommendations on poverty: the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Vietnam, Malaysia, Belgium, Finland, Bolivia, Turkey, Cuba and Indonesia. Overall, there was concern expressed about persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, women and Aboriginal women in particular. We are grateful for these recommendations.

Canada accepted in full or in part to, "continue to address socio-economic disparities and inequalities that persist across the country", stating that it will continue "to explore ways to enhance efforts to address poverty and housing issues, in collaboration with provinces and territories". The Canadian government also committed to giving "appropriate attention to vulnerable groups in policy development". These commitments have not come to fruition.

Canada rejected the recommendation made by the Russian Federation that it should adopt a national poverty strategy on the basis that taking a leadership role is beyond their Constitutional mandate, despite the fact that Parliament and the Senate have repeatedly suggested that the Federal government play just such a role.

The government continues to say it is focusing on jobs and skill training as the answer to reducing poverty. For many people, like Harriett, poverty is not so much related to a lack of skills or lack of job opportunities as it is about fleeing household violence, facing cancer or other life-threatening illnesses, living with a debilitating mental illness, or a lack of family supports.

7. Regardless of recommendations made, or commitments given, the reality is that poverty, homelessness and hunger are present, persistent, and not adequately addressed in Canada.

Canada remains one of the few developed countries without a national housing strategy. Instead of taking concrete action on housing and homelessness as it committed to doing in the last UPR, the Canadian government recently refused to support a bill (which was supported by all opposition parties) that would have established a national housing strategy, consistent with Canada's human rights obligations as articulated by the Special Rapporteur on Housing and several Treaty Monitoring Bodies. The government misled the public, calling it a "dangerous new spending scheme", despite the fact that

it included no references to spending. This, from a government that has aggressively implemented a regressive tax scheme. If government had not lowered tax rate in the last 5 years, there would be an extra **\$10 billion dollars or more** in revenue that could be spent on social programs. **Again, a government choice.**

Other retrogressive measures taken in the past year include:

- Decreasing the number of seniors who will be eligible for an income supplement
- Forcing unemployed individuals to accept jobs for less pay and that are farther from home

Stepping backwards only harms vulnerable people.

8. What's happening in Canada is not acceptable. Change is possible – it is a choice. Canada Without Poverty recommends you encourage the Canadian government to do the following:

**Commit to taking a leadership role to address poverty, homelessness and hunger which are easily solved in such a wealthy nation by:**

**Adopting national strategies based in human rights that focus on: poverty, homelessness and food security.**

**Reinstating the National Council on Welfare and the long form Census so that we have reliable data upon which to make social policy decisions.**

Poverty is not political – although it has been treated that way. Poverty is about people, and we need to put people first.

Thank you. We are happy to speak with you further at the end of the session.