

We need to find that middle ground

Written by MIKE BAKER

Just how much responsibility does a government, or we as a society, have when it comes to ensuring our poorest and most vulnerable individuals are sufficiently taken care of?

The answer to this question will almost certainly differ depending on who you talk to. It's the sort of loaded issue that will garner 1,000 distinctive responses, each jam-packed with personal biases, and a spin on statistics and expert opinion that fits whatever narrative the person you are speaking to is trying to push.

Just this past weekend, with this column firmly in mind, I posed that very question to ten of my closest friends and family members. While there very much is a fence dividing stances on the issue ? one being that our most vulnerable should, essentially, be propped up by society, and the other being that they should be left to fend for themselves ? it's clear that each of the fields on either side of that extremely polarizing fence are separated by dividers of their own.

From my teeny tiny polling pool, I had, from my perspective, nine positive responses, and one incredibly discouraging reply. Most of the comments centred around the belief that yes, we do have a responsibility to help those in need. There were specific references to people with physical and developmental disabilities, the unemployed, and the elderly. Presently, the Ontario government offers financial assistance by way of programs such as Ontario Works, and the Ontario Disability Support Program. The Canada Pension Plan takes care of individuals that have contributed to the federal pool over the course of their working life.

Now, onto the real purpose of this column, do those supports go far enough?

According to advocacy group Canada Without Poverty (CWP), there are nearly five million people in Canada currently living in poverty. Given that our national population, as of 2019, is slated at around 37.5 million, that would mean approximately 13 percent of all people presently residing in Canada are living under the poverty line. That's an astonishing number, but is it really that surprising?

The federal government published an official poverty dashboard in February of this year, shining a light on issues that affect literally millions of Canadians. That particular report states that 12.7 percent of Canadians, as of February, had unmet housing needs, 11.2 percent reported having unmet health needs, and 8.7 percent faced issues surrounding food security. Interestingly, the report also noted that only 51.2 percent of Canadians reported having enough savings to maintain their well-being for a period of three months in the event of a sudden job loss, illness or injury.

Again, this document was published in February. We all know what happened in March. This theoretical problem of having to support one's self and family without an income became a reality due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government was quick to jump in, creating the Canada Emergency Response Benefit to assist working Canadians impacted financially by the coronavirus. The program certainly has its detractors, but it has prevented several more million from falling into poverty. CERB provides up to \$2,000 per month to eligible applicants, and will run until Sept. 27. Approximately eight million Canadians have accessed CERB at some point since March, with roughly four million still relying on the program. In total, the federal government is anticipating the final cost of CERB to run north of \$100 billion.

In contrast, the Ontario government currently pays out around \$5.4 billion to support around 475,000 individuals through ODSP, and around \$3 billion assisting a further 450,000 people on Ontario Works benefits. There are many ins and outs of each of those programs, although a colleague of mine, Kira Wronska Dorward, reported in a story in this week's Caledon Citizen that the maximum monthly stipend under ODSP sits at \$1,169 ? a little more than half what people have been bringing in through CERB.

This has led to many, many people nationwide advocating for the introduction of a basic income program. Of course, the Ontario

government, then led by the Liberals under Kathleen Wynne, dipped their toes into the water on this back in 2018. Around 4,000 people residing in Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Brantford and Lindsay were enrolled, with individuals told they would receive approximately \$17,000 annually over a three-year period. Following that year's provincial election, where Doug Ford's Conservatives toppled Wynne's Liberals, the program was cancelled. Final payments were made to those enrolled in March 2019.

It has been difficult to gauge whether or not the basic income pilot was a success given the extremely limited time that people actually benefitted from it. Given that I lived in Lindsay for several years, I knew many people who were involved in the pilot. Over the course of the year these people received money, I know of someone who was able to completely clear a mountain of credit card debt left behind by a former partner that they otherwise would have had no way of paying off. I know someone who was able to go back to school, and has since transitioned into a new career. I also know of someone, who was on the cusp of being evicted from her home due to unpaid rent, that turned her living situation around and was able to provide a more stable home life for herself and her two children.

In essence, the basic income pilot did a lot of good. It also had its flaws, and was abused by some who found a way to cheat the system. Would a more permanent program, rolled out nationwide help to reduce poverty in Canada? Many experts believe it would, but it'd come at a considerable cost.

Back in 2018, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimated that a national basic income program modelled on the Ontario pilot would cost around \$76 billion annually, and would benefit 7.7 million Canadians. That is an incredible cost for a social assistance program, and would surely be up there with the most expensive anywhere in the world. Even taking into account the estimated reduced costs across other federal programs, a basic income initiative would still come at a price of around \$43 billion per year.

Given that total expenditures in 2019, as per that year's federal budget, came in at \$355.6 billion, adding another 12 or 13 percent to that total for a basic income program may not be feasible long-term. While some will point to the \$100 billion investment in CERB as proof the federal government can afford to take on such an endeavour, it should be noted this is being considered a one-time expense, and is one that Canadians will be dealing with, and paying off, for many, many years.

So, while yes, I believe we do have a responsibility to help those who are most in need, there is a limit to what that responsibility could and should be. We do not live in a perfect world. Money does not grow on trees. Assistance should be provided to those who need it, but not at the cost of bankrupting the whole system. There is a middle ground there that our politicians need to find.