

Making a Case to the Public

Social Assistance Advocacy, the '905 Belt' and the "Next 100 People Walking Down Yonge Street"

For Presentation at OISE – October 28, 2003

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February 2003

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The importance of the “905” Belt and the “Next 100 People Walking Down Yonge Street”

On October 4, 1993, Bell Telephone subdivided the Greater Toronto Area into two mandatory dial-based Area Codes:

- Toronto kept the 416 designation; and
- All the outlying areas, generally more prosperous & young received a new 905 designation.

Following the 1995 provincial election, it was noticed that each and every one of the ridings “in the 905” had voted for the new government– a real surprise of homogeneity. This gave rise to the expression “The 905 belt”, a swath of people who, along with seniors, became a force to be reckoned with for years to come.

The “next 100 people walking down Yonge Street” is much more amorphous as a concept. Over a number of years, I had the privilege to attend focus groups on the topic of social assistance or what is commonly known as welfare. Over and over again, people came into the focus group meeting rooms and with rare exception, expressed their unhappiness with welfare programs.

One person in the group would always see no problem and would increase social assistance benefits if they could. The others, usually 8-10 would display strong opinions essentially on what I have come to term, the illegitimacy of welfare. “Too many entitlements”, “too many people wanting something for nothing”, “ too much fraud”, “ not enough investigating” always interspersed with a vague anecdote about the friend of the friend who knew someone who was fraudulently collecting assistance.

There was also inordinate interest in what recipients of welfare thought about getting welfare: “Do these welfare people ever stop and think about the taxpayer who is working his backside off so they can sit at home?”

If the issue of children in poverty was raised, invariably the question arose” Why are they having children? – Where is the father?”

When I came away from these focus groups, I often walked down Yonge Street and took the Subway afterwards. On these occasions, I always had what I call a recurring “epiphnette”: The people in the focus groups look like the people on Yonge street and in the Subway car, the same gender, age and ethnicity profile.

What does the Public Think?

(Top 10) Conclusions about the thinking of the single largest bloc of the public:

Context: The public has very definite views about welfare – they will not be easily swayed.

1. The public locates poverty in individuals – it is seen as an individual deficit from which the individual must recover. Poverty is not a societal issue except as located in deficits of individuals.

2. Welfare is not and should not be ongoing income security for poor individuals – welfare is wholly illegitimate as an income security measure except for people down on their luck for a short period. It should not be seen as an entitlement.
3. Welfare should only deal with unforeseen circumstances – people who don't save or do not work may not be deserving of welfare. Parents on social assistance should not have broken up with their spouses (if single parents) and where breakup was unavoidable, the absent parent should pay to keep the family off welfare. People with children should not have had them if there was any understanding that they would be poor later on. People in these circumstances should consider adoption of their children to others.
4. Welfare should not be adequate to meet needs except on an extremely short-term basis. Adequacy will breed dependency.
5. Work in the paid labour force is the alternative to welfare. Social citizenship is based on obtaining and retaining work.
6. No new tax money should go to welfare programs.
7. There are high amounts of intergenerational welfare dependency that should be stopped – Try to get to the kids through education

8. Welfare should be spent on the items intended. Making poor purchasing choices should be grounds for ineligibility and should be considered as potential fraud.
9. It is wrong that people should get back on welfare after they have committed fraud. If they can do that, then there is in effect no penalty for having received public funds illegitimately.
10. Both the carrot and stick are useful approaches but recipients who do not respond quickly to encouragement require sanctions.

Caveat: There is growing evidence from U.S. polling that shows where people think the welfare system has been reformed, they tend to be much more ready to spend any savings on programs that will get people to become independent and join the mainstream of community life.

The Proof:

Welfare in Ontario: 1967 – (June) 1993

1967: \$100 Disabled \$115 or \$130

1970: Rates increased.

1971: Special Allowances Introduced in Charitable Institutions

1972: Patient co-payments/Comfort Allowances introduced in institutions

1973: 5% increase

1974: two increases - one was 11.3% in Oct 74

1975: Single Employable: \$177. Disabled \$240. then \$250.

1977: Single Employable: \$189.

1979: 6% increase did not go to employables

1980: Single Employable \$202. Unemployable \$222.Disabled \$315 (April 1980)
1981: Single Merged Rate: \$266 Disabled\$414. included shelter subsidy -
1982: \$313.Disabled \$414. (Permanently Unemployable taken to disabled rate)
1983: \$313.Disabled \$457.
1984: \$346/\$491
1985: \$368/\$519
1986: \$419/\$576
1987: \$440/\$655
1988: \$467/\$693.
1989: \$491/\$728 + restructuring (SARC – Transitions)

1990: \$567/\$818 + restructuring (SARC – Transitions – Back on Track)
1991: \$626/\$886 + restructuring (SARC – Transitions – Back on Track)
1992: \$656/\$921
1993: \$663/\$930

The Tally:

The 26 Year Period from 1967- June 1993

- **Single Rate: \$100 to \$663.**
- **Disabled Rate: \$115 to \$930.**
- **Eight restructuring Exercises with Improvements (includes Transitions: 1988)**

Welfare in Ontario: 1993 -2003

1993: \$663/\$930

1995: \$520/\$930

2003: \$520/\$930

The Tally:

The (almost) 10 Year Period from July 1993 to 2003: Inflation 17%+

- **Single Rate: \$ 663. to \$520. (- 21.6%)**
- **Disabled Rate: \$ 930. to \$930. (0%)**
- **Several Restructuring exercises making assistance harder to get. Introduction of Mandatory Participation. Some Exceptions:** Increases to Community Start-up Benefits, mandatory special necessities, special diets, hostel rates.

How should Advocates Respond to Prevailing Welfare Beliefs?

There is little point in trying to change people's beliefs about welfare **as a starting point** – they have thought these beliefs out and they are very closely held, interwoven into the values of the individuals.

This leaves, in general, two possible approaches to the question of welfare reform for advocates and progressives one calling for a whole new system of income and the other calling for change within the existing system:

A New Income System:

- The one path leads to abolishing welfare, to acknowledge that it is basically unreformable and to mount new income security programs that basically will no longer pay people needs tested amounts based on their family size, composition and willingness to undertake employment.
- This approach acknowledges the public's unwavering belief that welfare is illegitimate as income security for the poor. Advocates can therefore call for structural reform through standalone child benefits, separate benefits for persons with disabilities and employment related benefits and tax credits for unemployed, able-bodied adults that would end the current welfare structure.

Change Within the System:

- The second path leads to **three sub-approaches**:
 - **Taking the dissonant beliefs of the public and show the problems in maintaining those beliefs**

e.g. one ought to be virtually penniless while on welfare yet one should secure the means to be self-sufficient while on assistance

- **Measuring outcomes against beliefs.** Most opinions on welfare, although closely thought out in connection with values and outcomes, are seldom compared and contrasted, nor is real evidence gathered objectively to show how desired outcomes relate to beliefs and values

e.g. it may keep people off welfare if they are able to retain a cushion of resources while on assistance. (Note that this violates the notion that persons on welfare be penniless)

- **Comparing welfare with other institutions to show that welfare is subject to a set of harsh rules that do not apply to other programs and institutions**
 - e.g. a lifetime ban on collecting welfare for welfare fraud compared to the workplace: would we ban a person from working for a lifetime if the person committed workplace fraud?
 - e.g. the federal GIS has been increased 36 times since the last welfare rate increase in Ontario. Personal needs allowances for needy persons with disabilities have not been increased for 17 years. There have been 65 increases to Old Age Security since the last increase to the Personal Needs Allowance. Does this lead to cause for concern?

Key Messages:

Welfare programs ought to lead to paid work and, compared to other programs they have fallen behind.

Welfare has been reformed but it has not kept up.

The Choice: Allowing the Public to Retain its Values and Belief Systems

The ultimate choice involved in this approach to advocacy is the challenge to allow the public to keep its values and beliefs. Under this approach, the advocate makes the choice to work with the views that the public already holds and attempts to match dissonant beliefs, measure outcomes and compare and contrast approaches in order to create broad public consensus and support for reform.

This is very different as:

- **the advocate usually attempts to entice the broader public to consider a range of questions that would invoke compassion (adequacy), fairness (equity), and social justice (inclusiveness); and**
- **it allows/forces people to change their values on their own should they be willing;**
- **it takes the approach of “climbing the easy side of Mount Everest”**

Advocates share the values of compassion (adequacy), fairness (equity), and social justice (inclusiveness) but appear to the rest of the public to **neither know nor care that the public at large (the 905 and the next 100 people walking down Yonge Street** who, on balance hold other values at a higher-level e.g. **self-sufficiency, acceptance, personally overcoming challenges and adversity**

This choice leads to wholly different communications choices that are far away from the approach normally taken by advocates. The following chart shows some of the different approaches that would be taken under an approach:

What not to say based on what non-advocate listeners may think:

Do not say anything that concerns welfare on it's own without comparisons to other income security programs and work analogues.

- 1. Welfare rates are too low (i.e. compared to what?)**
- 2. Welfare rates are below any recognized poverty line (most people think they don't get paid what they are worth based on the benchmarks they use)**
- 3. Welfare is underfunded (everything is underfunded)**
- 4. No one can live on what welfare pays (right- they shouldn't be able to!- they should get jobs)**
- 5. People have to go to food banks to make ends meet (then why would you raise welfare then?)**
- 6. People have to take rent money out of their food budget (so do I - why shouldn't they?)**
- 7. Think about the children of a single parent having to live on welfare (why are they having children?
- Where is the father?)**

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Traditional Advocacy Comment</i>	<i>Proposed Advocacy Approach</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<i>Low Welfare Rates</i>	Raise Rates- Under-funding is unfair	OAS has been raised 36 times since welfare was last increased. Cumulative effect of CPI and cuts is over 30%. the last increase was May 1993 meaning that in less than six months, there will have been no rate increase in 10 years despite 13% to 15% inflation in the meantime - no government since modern welfare rates went in in 1967 has gone more than 3 years without some kind of increase whether during years of high inflation or not . - minimum wages are now more than 100% higher than social assistance so raises can be made to social assistance without creating disincentives.	Comparison Work analogues
<i>Inability to Live on Welfare</i>	People cannot feed themselves on the rates provided and they should be able to meet nutrition and other standards	The 21.6% decrease in 1995 has grown into a 30% + rate decrease when inflation has been added in.	Comparison
<i>Welfare Does not meet Standard e.g. Poverty Lines</i>	Welfare Rates should be raised to poverty standards	See Above	Comparison
<i>Children on Welfare suffer.</i>	Child Poverty a major problem children not helped out of poverty will cost more later	Even programs like winter coats and back to school allowances have lost 13% to inflation (so even if you don't want to raise welfare, does a winter coat still cost the same as it did in 1993?)	Comparison

<p><i>Welfare Traps People (asset and income rules)</i></p>	<p>Welfare takes away too much as recipients start to earn money. People are forced to get rid of their assets and it's harder for them to get off.</p>	<p>- welfare recipients can earn back the difference between the old rates and the new - but that was in 1995 . The \$143 dollars a month should be at least \$160. now</p>	<p>Comparison Work analogues</p>
<p><i>Welfare does not meet housing cost</i></p>	<p>Welfare should meet the cost of housing. Housing allowances should be raised</p>	<p>When rates were set at 10% above the rates in the other nine provinces, no one was thinking that they would stay there by relying on other provinces reducing their rates too does someone on welfare trying to get a minimum wage job in downtown Toronto have the same costs as his or her counterpart in rural Prince Edward Island? Surely that difference is more than 10%).</p>	<p>Comparison Work analogues</p>
<p><i>People on Welfare Suffer Discrimination</i></p>	<p>The rights of welfare recipients should be upheld. Discrimination against welfare recipients is unfair and illegal.</p>	<p>Not everyone in Ontario is better off - this is one group that is not.)</p>	<p>Comparison</p>

<i>Welfare Recipients are easy to victimize</i>	People on welfare are often unable to articulate and lobby for their concerns. They don't receive what they should and others less needy receive more. (e.g. corporations and individual tax breaks.)	Invariably social assistance will be better off later in life (with OAS/GIS etc.) RRSP's for them means that they lose money	Comparison
<i>Tough Intrusive Welfare Rules</i>	Welfare recipients are victimized by tough rules (e.g. zero tolerance) that others in society do not have to face. This is unfair.	It is interesting that if one is caught committing fraud in the workplace that there is no lifetime ban on working.	Comparison Work analogue.