

Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada

Senator Erminie J. Cohen

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you all for coming, and the Atlantic Human Rights Centre for honouring me with the invitation to speak this evening.

The title of my lecture, *Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada*, echoes the title of a recent report which I recently co-authored. My report provides an overview of the most significant issues of the 1990s, bringing to the forefront the types of economic and policy changes which have had a negative impact on the poor. Among other things, it analyses the measurements of poverty, those classified as poor, the role of the labour market, and Canada's international commitments to combat poverty. Above all it paints a portrait of poor Canadians and their families, from children to seniors. It explores the reasons for and the consequences of their poverty, including discrimination and poor bashing, and it warns of a bleak future if changes are not made soon - a future where children who live in poverty today will be a threat of lifelong exclusion from mainstream society. My wish is that these damaging truths which reflect on our nation will motivate Canadians collectively to sound the alarm to halt harsh assault on our social programs. The purpose of this report is to bring the complex problem of poverty to the attention of the Canadian public and the collective mind of government, with the expectation that a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy will be developed and acted upon.

Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada sprang from my involvement last spring in an event, that unexpectedly, was to represent a pivotal point in my understanding of what it means to Canadians. "Voices in Action", the Atlantic Conference for Poor People, was being held in my home city of Saint John. It was the first such event ever organized by the poor to address their specific issues. Invited to be the Honourary Chair, I attended with notes in hand and a genuine sense of pride that I might be viewed as a sympathetic "dignitary" to the plight of the poor.

But "Voices in Action" turned out to be an event which truly changed my life and my perceptions of poverty, social programs, and indeed, Canada itself. What I experienced during the conference profoundly altered the context in which I viewed my world. Like many Canadians, I had never really thought about the poor people around me, and I believed that my country had strong social programs which ensured everyone an adequate standard of living. But I was shocked to learn that our social program have been chipped away to the point where they often no longer provide even the basics of nutritious food, adequate clothing, and secure, decent shelter. And as if being poverty-stricken were not hardship enough, I was further dismayed to discover that poor people are often treated as second-class citizens by their fellow Canadians.

In the midst of this gathering of people of poor economic status, I was moved by the wealth of spirit and courage that was expressed in their dignified and honest discussions about being poor in Canada. Shocked and, above all, inspired by what they had to say, I came away with a renewed sense of purpose. I was determined to add my voice to those who will not tolerate poverty in this rich land of ours. And I was determined to use the resources that I have as a Senator to help sensitize Canadians and their governments to a true state of poverty in Canada today. It was my hope that I could help focus the attention of Canadians on poverty as a priority issue, and thus turn the tide of public sentiment so that we could all start working together on solutions.

I timed the release of my report to coincide with the start of International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, declared by the United Nations for 1997 to 2006. I believe that the International Decade is a wonderful opportunity to keep people focused on poverty for long enough to propose, implement and start seeing results of meaningful, long-term solutions to this terrible problem. Accordingly, my report provides a snapshot of poverty in Canada that I hope will serve as a benchmark against which progress can be measured as the International Decade unfolds. This is particularly important, given that the designation of 1996 as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty was largely ignored by politicians, policy makers and the general public here in Canada.

The International Decade also provides a backdrop for the body of my talk this evening. While researching my report, I became aware of the growing disparity between what our Canadian delegates are signing in the international fora, and domestic policy outcomes. Notable in this regard is Canada's failure to honour its international commitments to take measures to eradicate poverty within its borders. In particular, my report discusses this failure in terms of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Canada signed more than two decades ago. It frames its call for action on the poverty front in terms of it being a domestic policy imperative, and in terms of Canada honouring international commitments that it has already made.

This evening it is my objective to clearly position poverty as the human rights issue which I have long believed it to be. I will approach it by discussing certain aspects of the development of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, its contribution to international law, and its applicability to the poverty situation in Canada.

I chose to focus on this particular agreement because, in signing it in 1976, the federal government explicitly recognized the rights of every Canadian to, and I quote: "an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions".

Yet, more than twenty years later, this right, which is included in Article 11 of the Covenant, remains nothing more than a grand deal. It and certain other rights

established in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are still not protected by our Charter of Rights and Freedoms or by Canadian human rights legislation. Thus, they do not carry the force of law or even weight of moral authority. In fact, for poor Canadians, they are not rights at all!

As a result, although living conditions have improved in some ways for some Canadians, Canada has failed to ensure that its most vulnerable citizens have access to the basics of food, clothing and housing. My report notes, for example, that food banks, which were non-existent in the 1970s now number into the thousands and can be found in no fewer than 450 communities. The lack of affordable, adequate housing has also become a crisis - almost 400,000 Canadians live in housing which does not meet acceptable housing standards. It is therefore not surprising that, in June 1993, a United Nations committee released a report that was sharply critical of Canada's lack of progress in implementing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

But before I turn my attention to the Covenant itself, several issues need to be addressed. I must make the point that, when the poverty debate is framed in an international context, it can be easy for people in a rich country like ours to overlook or underestimate the severity of the problems facing poor Canadians. I believe that two key factors are involved in this instance. First, the poverty of Canadians is not highly visible, nor is it at all high on the legislative agenda. After all, we are not in most cases dealing with absolute poverty which, as defined by the United Nations, reflects a state of bare survival. We are not faced, domestically with images of starving masses or sad-eyed, swollen-bellied, fly-covered children - the kinds of images that evoke our compassion when they are transmitted to us from other parts of the world. There is no feeling of urgency or despair, no sense of imminent crisis.

As I noted in my report, however, we must ensure that we keep the parameters of at least relative poverty in mind, this measure being much more applicable in Canada. According to the UN, the concept of relative poverty recognizes that poverty is not just a matter of bare survival, but also constitutes a minimal standard of living as measured by the community in which one lives. We should therefore, at a minimum, be considering relative poverty when we discuss the Canadian case. Ideally, in fact, we should view Canada's poverty situation in terms of the United Nations' human development approach, which uses additional criteria, such as infant mortality rates, nutrition, health and literacy, that affect the overall quality of life. This is the approach which I see reflected in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

A second factor which might explain why Canadians have adopted a posture of disbelief and complacency about the poverty in their midst relates to Canada's social programs. As Canadians, we have defined our social programs as an integral part of our national

identity. Canadian values, including a helping hand to those who are less fortunate, have traditionally been reflected in our social programs, which have been about hope, security and sharing. Above all, they have been about the pursuit of equality. Accordingly, we have come to view them as such a source of pride that they have taken on almost mythical proportions in our collective mind. This appears to have spawned the belief that our social programs are perhaps exceedingly generous. And this in turn has led to an unfair and unfounded perception that those who benefit - particularly poor people on social assistance - must be getting a free ride, as it were. This is despite the fact that our social programs have been pared down to the point where, in many cases, they are grossly inadequate to the task of meeting the day to day needs of poor Canadians.

These misconceptions and complacency are further fuelled, I believe, by the fact that for three years running, Canada has been judged by the United Nations as the best nation in which to live, compared to 174 other countries. However, it bears noting that the UN uses an index which is limited to three factors: life expectancy, education levels, per capita income. Since most of our population is middle-class, Canada is bound to score well on a test based on averages. But the index ignores the difficult conditions under which the bottom 20 percent of income earners are forced to live. Poverty rates and unemployment rates in Canada are among the highest found in industrialized countries. Our child poverty rate is the second highest of the industrialized world, while our child benefits are the lowest. Canada has also the second largest percentage of low-wage workers, with almost 25% of our workforce qualifying as working poor. Being rated number one does not put food on the table or pay the rent.

In addition, this comparative study is based on data that is at least two years old, and the effects of government cuts to social programs are not reflected in the findings. In the past two years, family incomes have dropped, infant mortality rates have risen, and post-secondary education has become increasingly inaccessible. As well, many industrialized nations have joined the so-called "race to the bottom", such that comparing one to the other may no longer provide a useful indicator of citizen health. In any event, Canadians certainly have no reason to feel smug, and should prepare to rank much lower in years to come.

As a result of the comparative international context, our aggregate wealth as a nation, and other factors that I have mentioned, attitudes in Canada towards poor people and their plight are hardening, with the poor now being held responsible for all their economic hardships. Acting on our own fears and vulnerabilities, we blame the victims, instead of taking a critical look at the larger social and economic circumstances that are creating more widespread and persistent poverty. This is occurring to such an extent that the term "poor bashing" has been coined by the poor to describe the hostility they feel directed at them because of their poverty. Poor bashing promotes discrimination

against the poor, and often trivializes the dire circumstances in which they find themselves.

Debt and deficit hysteria has also contributed to poor bashing. Governments have succeeded in leading the majority of Canadians to believe that the cost of social programs is at the heart of our debt and deficit problem. While rising unemployment did result in higher welfare caseloads in the 1990s, far more costly - and certainly more to blame for the increasing deficits of the early 1990s - were high interest rates governments were paying on their debt.

Poor bashing is on the rise and the poor feel it in their daily lives. It can happen to anywhere, and be perpetuated by anyone. It can be obvious, as it often is on radio call-in shows featuring such derogatory comments as "those lazy so and so's". Or, it can take the form of more subtle remarks of those in power, including official pronouncements like "those who choose not to work will not be eligible for social assistance". In short, poor bashing has infected Canadian society. In most cases, it is evident that poor bashers know very little about being poor in an affluent country, and assume that everyone has the same advantages. Meanwhile, citizens who must rely on social programs are forced to feel humiliated and despised. Poor people are often treated as second-class citizens, facing discrimination when applying for apartments and bank accounts, or when cashing government cheques.

Unfortunately, this situation has created a vicious circle. Because of popular antipathy to social spending, the federal and provincial governments have been given "carte blanche" by voters to slash programs. The rationale offered for such actions by those in power serve to reinforce existing negative attitudes and stereotypes. Governments convey the impression that Canadians are offered the same advantages, and tend to locate the problem of poverty with the individual. Self-reliance, and independence - codewords for government buck passing - are stressed in public policy. At the same time, governments which stress independence almost never mention that there is simply not enough room in the current labour market for everybody to earn a decent living.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the framing of economic rights as human rights would go a long way towards changing these type of persistent attitudes, and their harmful outcomes. Therefore, as a first step, I have recommended in my report that the Canadian Human Rights Act be amended to extend and give legal effect to the principle that everyone should have equal opportunity, by banning discrimination based on economic status. I was pleased to learn that this recommendation was validated, early this year, by the new head of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Michelle Falardeau-Ramsay. The Montreal Gazette of January 4, 1997, reported that she will seek to have protection against discrimination based on income or social condition

included in the Canadian Human Rights Act. And it quoted her saying "I think poverty is probably the ground of discrimination that exists most in society". Ladies and Gentlemen, I could not agree more!

My recommendation to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act draws on the philosophical foundations of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural rights, which clearly aims to establish economic rights as human rights within its signatory states. While successful national outcomes have thus far proven to be elusive, with Canada being a case in point, the Covenant at the very least provides a compelling basis in international law for explicit recognition on Canadian soil.

This Covenant was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 16, 1966, and entered into force on January 3, 1976. As of February 1994, it has been ratified or acceded to by 126 nations, including Canada. And its signatories represent all geographical areas, as well as a range of social, political and legal systems. The Covenant is unique in that it is the only international human rights instrument, other than the geographically limited European Charter, which deals extensively with economic, social and cultural rights. However, it does not stand alone or exist in a vacuum - rather, it forms an integral part of the body of international human rights law.

In fact, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is the second of five instruments that together forms the International Bill of Human Rights. Before 1945, international law was generally not concerned with how independent countries treated individuals within their borders; such matters were generally considered to be within the domestic jurisdiction of each state. However, the International Bill of Human Rights, which was conceived in 1947, changed all that. It was intended to form the basis of freedom, justice and world peace following the Second World War. In accordance with the United Nations Charter, the protection of human rights, both among and within nations, was to become a centrepiece of the establishment of a new world order.

The first instrument of the International Bill of Human Rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948. The Declaration, which is non-binding, has served as an important standard of reference in the development of human rights norms. It draws inspiration and authority from the United Nations Charter itself, noting in its preamble that:

"The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, and in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women, and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

The third, fourth and fifth instruments of the International Bill of Human Rights are, respectively, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and its two optional protocols. These agreements expand and define the terms set out in the Universal Declaration, and establish legal obligations to which signatory states may bind themselves.

So, while the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights was only adopted by the UN in 1966, its origins stretch back more than two decades before that, to the birth of the international human rights movement and of the United Nations itself.

As the title of its instruments suggest, the International Bill of Human Rights encompasses what have come to be regarded as two distinct categories of human rights - civil and political rights in one category and economic, social and cultural rights in the other. Civil and political rights includes the right to life, liberty and security of the person, while economic, social and cultural rights include the right to work, to fair conditions of employment, to join and form trade unions, to social security, housing, health, education and culture.

For the most part, the rights found in each of these supposed categories are treated separately by the International Bill of Human Rights, in two agreements governed by separate implementation procedures. However, the development of the International Bill of Human Rights shows that they are inextricably linked as human rights. When the International Bill of Human Rights was conceived, political and civil rights, together with economic, social and cultural rights, were considered part of a single category - that of human rights, period. And in the 1950s, the UN General Assembly recognized that, and I quote, "the enjoyment of civil and political freedoms and economic, social and cultural rights are interconnected and interdependent".

This is nowhere more evident than in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which gives recognition to both civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights. For example, Article 22 of the Declaration states that:

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

It was initially envisioned that there would be one covenant dealing both with civil and political rights, and with economic, social and cultural rights. Indeed, work was undertaken to draft such an instrument. Even when the decision was made, reluctantly, in 1952 to draft two separate treaties, the United Nations decided that these would be approved simultaneously, and would be opened for signature at the same time. The

General Assembly, in its direction to the Commission on Human Rights, noted that the idea was to emphasize the unity of aim of the two covenants.

As Matthew Craven notes in his 1995 book titled "The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: A Perspective on Its Development", a key factor in the UN's eventual decision to draft two separate treaties was a potentially paralyzing ideological conflict between Western democracies and Eastern socialist states. Soviet states were championing the cause of economic, social and cultural rights, while Western nations were clamouring for priority to be placed on civil and political rights instead. As a result, the drafting process threatened to derail.

The separation of these two groupings of human rights into two covenants has contributed to the idea that economic, social and cultural rights are actually a distinct and separate group of rights. And it has helped to validate a belief that economic, social and cultural rights are inferior in status to their civil and political counterparts. But the drafting of the two separate covenants did not in itself cause such ideological divisions. Rather, it simply perpetuated a wider, ongoing debate regarding the validity of economic, social and cultural rights versus civil and political rights, and regarding the nature of human rights in general.

Craven examines the arguments that have variously been put forward by human rights scholars on both sides of the debate. He concludes that, while some differences do exist, there is no justifiable basis for denying economic, social and cultural rights the status of human rights, and for maintaining an absolute distinction between them and civil and political rights. In the interest of time, I will briefly summarize the main rationales for considering economic, social and cultural rights as fundamental human rights. These serve to uphold the United Nations' assertion that civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights are interconnected and interdependent. They also confirm my own longstanding belief that effective solutions to poverty in Canada must necessarily be approached from a human rights perspective.

It has been persuasively argued that economic, social and cultural rights do qualify as human rights, since they share with civil and political counterparts the so-called "essential characteristics" of universality and absoluteness. Their detractors claim that economic, social and cultural rights are not universal, because they are essentially means-tested. That is, they make the case that these do not apply to every individual solely on the basis of his or her humanity, but only to certain classes of people defined by their social or economic position. However, the point is clearly made that economic, social and cultural rights are universal in the sense that they apply, at least potentially, to everyone. Their universal applicability is also made clear by the references to 'everyone' in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In the case of universality, it can be seen that economic, social and cultural rights do share this characteristic with civil and political rights. In the case of absoluteness, however, the converse has been shown to be true: while economic, social and cultural rights are not absolute, neither, in some cases, are civil and political rights. The concept of absoluteness has been defined in terms of human rights being "negative", in that they essentially require non-interference by the state, and can thus, as is largely the case with civil and political rights, be respected immediately. Economic and social rights, on the other hand, are considered "positive", in that they require the state to provide resources and can thus be realized right away. Examples cited by Craven of political and civil rights which are positive in nature include the right to a fair trial, which requires the state to develop and maintain a system of courts in order to ensure an individual's right to fair trial. Thus, economic, social and cultural rights cannot be excluded from consideration as human rights on the basis of absoluteness, any more than they can be on grounds of universality.

It has also been convincingly argued that economic, social and cultural rights are essential conditions for the full enjoyment of civil and political rights. The examples offered in this case point to the virtual meaningless right of the right to freedom of expression for someone who is starving or homeless. Moreover, Craven notes that economic, social and cultural rights can also be viewed as valuable considerations in their own right, regardless of what they contribute to the enjoyment of civil and political rights.

A further point of contention in the ongoing human rights debate that has pitted economic, social and cultural rights against civil and political rights involves their claimability and enforceability. The theory holds that an individual cannot possess a right if he or she cannot claim, demand or insist upon it - in short, if the state or the international community is not prepared to enforce it. Indeed, in the case of economic, social and cultural rights, the individual often has no judicial or political recourse. However, I believe that this simply reflects a lack of political will, and is not in any way an indicator of the inherent worth of rights. And I remind you of my earlier comment, that because of Canada's failure to give effect to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the rights that it contains have not yet been implemented as rights for Canadians. The Covenant does not have direct applicability in Canada only because it has not been made a part of our domestic law.

A sad result of this ideological turf war has been that, outside of the United Nations offices and committee rooms, economic, social and cultural rights remain largely ignored. As Craven notes, and I quote: "in the majority of states, economic, social and cultural rights are almost entirely absent from the common discourse on human rights". We need to look no further than the borders of our own country to find ample proof of this.

This unfortunate state of affairs was unflinchingly capsulized by the United Nations Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its statement to the World Conference in 1993. It said:

The international community continues to tolerate all too often breaches of economic, social and cultural rights which, if they occurred in relation to civil and political rights, would provoke expressions of horror and outrage and would lead to concerted calls for immediate remedial action. In effect, despite the rhetoric, violations of civil and political rights continue to be treated as though they were far more serious, and more patently intolerable, than massive and direct denials of economic, social and cultural rights.

This is certainly the case in Canada and, I believe, contributes to the lack of any sense of crisis which, I noted earlier, is missing from the consideration of poverty among Canadians. For example, numerous demonstrations undertaken in protest are people by the poor themselves. Few representatives of the higher-income economic classes lend their support to the causes of one in five Canadians who live in poverty. Yet, if it were the civil and political rights of 20% of the Canadian population that were being denied or negated, you can be sure that most of the other 80% would take to the streets as well.

Ladies and gentlemen, the fact remains that the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has been in force for over twenty years now, with little appreciable progress having been achieved towards its objectives. This could be taken as an indication that the detractors of economic, social and cultural rights have won the human rights debate, that there is no support within the international community for their pursuit, and that the Covenant will simply be allowed to fade quietly into history. But I do not believe this to be the case or I would certainly not have chosen to speak to you on this subject tonight.

One of the reasons why the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has not been the effective instrument envisioned by its architects is that, until 1986, it was really not more than ink on paper. Its terms needed clarification and, even though the Covenant provided for periodic reviews to monitor compliance, it was not endowed with an effective supervisory mechanism. But that situation changed in 1986, when a group of independent human rights experts, the United Nations Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, was created. It was charged with generating a clearer understanding of the terms of the Covenant, and developing a meaningful system of supervision. And, as Craven notes, it has applied itself with energy to this task. I am therefore hopeful that positive results will be forthcoming in the Canadian case, especially as Canada has already found itself the object of a critical report issued by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Thanks to the work of this committee, the United Nations is now starting to take note of the lack of progress in implementing the Covenant here in Canada. federal and provincial governments have barely begun to take steps to develop human rights legislation which is in keeping with our international agreements. Canada cannot continue to pretend internationally that it is living up to the promises it made by signing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Poor Canadians already know better. After all, they live the disparity between agreements signed by Canadian delegates in international fora and our domestic policies. While our governments have failed to implement the Covenant in any meaningful way, that failure to act has not gone unnoticed - or unchallenged. In May 1993, the National Anti-Poverty Organization and the Charter Committee on Poverty Issues went to Geneva to testify at the Consideration of Canada's Second report on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The submission brief presented to the Committee, as well as the presentations made by NAPO and the CCPI, clearly illustrated the inequality found within what they aptly called "this land of plenty". Much of the information surprised the Committee, which had thought Canada provided a good standard of living for all of its citizens. Its members were shocked to hear about high poverty rates for children and single mothers, a high number of food banks and the disrepair of much of our low-income-housing.

In June 1993, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights released its concluding observations from the hearings. While the Committee was pleased to see a decline in the number of seniors living in poverty and a strong, accessible health care system, it also had many concerns. These included:

The persistence of poverty in a wealthy country, with no progress made in alleviating poverty over the last decade, or in alleviating the severity of poverty among a number of vulnerable groups, such as single mothers, including:

- i. Reduced federal contributions to social assistance;
- ii. The failure of welfare programs to provide an income which is at or above the poverty line;
- iii. The evidence of hunger in Canada and the need for food banks; and
- iv. The problem of homelessness, inadequate housing for the poor, and the low government expenditure on housing.

The committee was also concerned by the fact that both federal and provincial courts regard social and economic rights as "policy objectives" and do not uphold them as fundamental human rights. It further criticized the fact that economic and social rights found in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are not protected by Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Based on these findings, the committee made several recommendations, including:

- i. The incorporation of social, economic, and cultural rights into domestic human rights legislation;
- ii. Concerted government action to eliminate the need for food banks;
- iii. Security of tenure for all tenants;
- iv. Restoration of the Court Challenge Program; and
- v. The provision of training courses to the Canadian judiciary on Canada's obligations under the Covenant, and on their effect on the interpretation and application of Canadian law.

These findings and recommendations were a sharp criticism of Canada, which is a wealthy nation and has an international reputation as a caring society. The Concluding Observation was an embarrassment to the Canadian government, and indeed, to all Canadians.

But will it succeed in provoking positive action? To date, the Court Challenges Program has been reinstated, but none of the other recommendations made by the committee has been addressed by the federal government. Meanwhile, and more ominously, the elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan was actually a move away from social and economic rights for the poor. Many of the rights contained in the CAP were similar to those found in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the right to freely chose work, the right to social insurance, and the right to an adequate standard of living. Now that the CAP has been terminated, there is no deferral legislation to ensure those basic rights for Canadians.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which complements anti-discrimination provisions found in federal and provincial human rights legislation, guarantees that every citizen will enjoy equal protection and benefit of the law. It sets out equality rights which make it illegal to discriminate against any individual on the basis of age, race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex or mental or physical disability. The Canadian Human Rights Act goes even further, having recently been amended to extend this protection on the basis of sexual orientation. Meanwhile, the poor are not explicitly protected by either of these legislative instruments, so they have nothing to protect them from discrimination based on their economic status, for example, when seeking accommodation or services, or from subjugation on our public airwaves.

I would like to mention, as an example of the kinds of actions that are needed, an initiative that the government of Alberta has taken to give poor people some human rights protection. In July 1996, the provincial legislature replaced the Alberta Human Rights Act, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act with the Individual's Rights and Protection Act. The new Act provides better protection for many minority groups,

including the poor. It does this by extending protection from discrimination to tenants on the basis of source of income. In other words, it is now illegal for landlords to refuse poor applicants because they are on social assistance. While there is still a long way to go - both in that province and across Canada - to ensure economic rights for poor people, the Alberta initiative is a welcome step in the right direction.

As a final point on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, it bears nothing that this treaty makes specific reference only to the position of women and children. It does not identify other groups which might be considered to need special protection. In Canada's case, my report notes that senior citizens, recent immigrants, people with physical and mental disabilities and Aboriginal Canadians have also been affected by the poverty that constitutes a negation of their economic rights. However, since the rights to which the Covenant refers are the rights of everyone, the scope of its article is in no way restricted. Canadian governments remain free to take whatever actions are necessary in this regard, and should be urged to do so without delay.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that this is a propitious point at which to conclude my address to you this evening. But its conclusion will not mark the end of the voyage of discovery on which I embarked when I decided to become active on the poverty front. That voyage started during the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Not only have I learned a great deal about the alarming extent of poverty here in Canada, and those who are mired in it, my eyes are also opened to the important place that economic rights occupy in the international human rights. And what I have learned has reinforced my longstanding belief that poverty is first and foremost a human rights issue and should be addressed as such by Canada's federal and provincial governments, and jealously guarded by its citizens. Only by taking that approach can we hope to conceive and implement effective, long-term solutions to this terrible problem.

This evening, you graciously shared part of that voyage with me, as I attempted to clearly position poverty as a human rights issue. I did so through discussions of my report, *Sounding the Alarm: Poverty in Canada*, with particular reference to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as international human rights law in general. And I sincerely hope that I succeeded in my aim.

Together, we glimpsed the face of despair as we surveyed the deteriorating economic circumstances of poor Canadians, the growing inability of our social programs to meet their needs, and the hardening of attitudes towards them. We also gazed on the face of hope as we ventured into the realm of opportunity that the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has laid before the world's poor citizens. And we saw the rights that it contains established as fundamental human rights in the birth of the international human rights movement itself.

Now the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty has opened a new window of opportunity that Canada cannot afford to ignore. We must declare early in this International decade that we as a nation can no longer ignore the growing blight of poverty amongst our citizens, and the continued denial of many of their fundamental human rights. We must not continue to play at the edges of the problem by offering piecemeal solutions. It is ultimately not in Canada's interests continue to ignore the human rights of 20% of its population. The impacts and consequences of poverty are well known and well documented. We do not need more studies - we need the political will to begin a human rights based strategy that is consistent with our international commitments to alleviate poverty. We must begin to effectively address the most pressing issues that the poor face on a day-to-day basis.

Whether they realize it or not, those opposed to such a strategy are promoting an economy based on hunger, dispossession and injustice. One thing is certain: if government remains dormant and allows the status quo to continue, Canadian society as we know it surely come to an end.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to address you this evening.