

All Candidates Meeting: Poverty, Homelessness & Harm Reduction

May 7, 2013

Location: First Metropolitan Church Hall, 932 Balmoral Rd.

Doors at 6:15pm, meeting at 7pm

Hosted by the Downtown Service Providers

Invited Candidates:

- Karen Bill, Liberal
- Carole James, NDP
- Jane Sterk, Green
- John Shaw, Communist Party of BC

In advance of the Meeting, the sponsoring organizations developed a list of the most important questions on these issues – here are the questions and their responses:

Question 1

British Columbia is one of only two provinces in Canada that has not yet adopted a poverty reduction plan, despite having the highest poverty rate in the country and the highest child-poverty rate for 8 years running. Do you have a poverty reduction strategy? If so, please describe its components. If not, why not?

Carole James, NDP:

Reducing poverty, and child poverty in particular, will be a top priority of a BC NDP government. The BC NDP will implement a Poverty Reduction Plan with legislation and clear measurable targets, and we have committed to first steps towards that plan. Income assistance rates will be immediately pegged to inflation, and will increase by \$20/month in year two. The income-assistance earnings exemption will be immediately doubled to \$400/month. We will expand funding for front-line workers and reform the services at the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Children and Families and Community Living BC.

And the NDP will invest \$210 million in a Family Bonus Program that will provide low and modest income families with an \$829 annual grant for each child. These resources will not be clawed back from families on income assistance. This program will lift an estimated 8,400 children and their families out of poverty.

A good poverty reduction strategy must tackle some of the underlying problems that lead to poverty. The lack of mental health supports is a major underlying contributor to poverty – that's why an NDP government will invest \$35 million in youth mental health treatment and outreach. And we can't forget our seniors and people with disabilities who live in such precarious conditions – an NDP government will invest \$70 million for complex home care services for seniors and people with disabilities, and \$35 million for residential care for seniors who can't live independently any more. We will also build up to 1,500 units of affordable housing each year to meet the pressing need for quality affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families.

Jane Sterk, Green:

BC Greens believe in a poverty elimination strategy and would achieve that through a Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI). Income levels would be set through the low-income cutoff. Monies in income supplements would be pooled to create one pool of money. Additional money would come by reducing the bureaucracy that is in the service of keeping people in poverty. We think that, if used differently, there may be enough money in the current system to fund a made-in-BC GLI. In addition, there would be savings to the health care system (social determinants of health), to costs associated with social housing (people would have choice about housing), to policing (spent in both monitoring and harassing homeless people and responding to criminal activity), and to such less direct costs associated with things like child welfare (\$40,000 annually to keep a child in care) where often the conditions that lead to a child's removal relates to poverty, often multi-generational.

Canada had an experiment in GLI in the early seventies in Dauphine MB that was very successful and reduced health care costs by 6% during the time of the experiment. The data from this project is just now being analyzed and there were no negatives.

The best work on GLI has been and is being done by Senator Hugh Segal. People can find more of his work at

http://www.hughsegal.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=241%3Awhy-guaranteeing-the-poor-an-income-will-save-us-all-in-the-end-&catid=6%3Aopeds&Itemid=6&lang=en

It would be best to have a willing partner with the federal government but absent that, Greens would create an expert commission to design a made-in-BC GLI.

John Shaw, Communist Party of BC

The Liberal economic policies of privatisation, tax subsidies for their rich friends, give-away of lands and resources to transnational corporations have depleted government revenues, caused environmental devastation, and contributed to unemployment, poverty and hopelessness for most British Columbians. We need to reverse those practices by, among other things, raising social assistance rates by 50%, by increasing the minimum wage to \$18 per hour, and by restoring tax rates on the wealthy and the corporations to pre-2001 levels. By recapturing lost revenue from the rich, the provincial government can re-finance the social programs that, at one time, almost eliminated poverty in the province. Fair taxation and a job creation strategy based on the sustainable and environmentally-sound development of our natural and manufacturing resources is the only real way of permanently reducing poverty.

Question 2

Would you support the development and implementation of safe consumption services in Greater Victoria, similar to the INSITE program operating in Vancouver? Please explain your reasons.

Carole James, NDP:

The BC NDP believe that we have a responsibility to look into all options for harm reduction for those suffering from addiction and mental health issues. We believe in the Four Pillar approach (prevention, treatment, harm reduction, enforcement), which includes safe consumption services.

Jane Sterk, Green:

Yes we support the implementation of a safe injection site like INSITE in Victoria. Safe injection sites are one part of a harm reduction strategy and INSITE has been saving people's lives. Victoria has seen a recent spike in deaths of street people. Thirty people died in a four-month period. A safe injection site might prevent other premature deaths. In addition to saving lives, INSITE prevents the spread of diseases like HIV-AIDS and Hepatitis C. INSITE is also a contact point for people who want to enter treatment for their addictions. However, that advantage is not an advantage if there are not services available for people when they need them. Therefore, in addition to INSITE, we need to provide treatment – both emergency and long-term therapeutic care for detox and recovery from addictions.

John Shaw, Communist Party of BC

I am fully in favour of establishing safer injection sites in places of high need, particularly downtown Victoria. The vast amount of study and research into the efficacy of injection sites similar to the INSITE program in Vancouver indicate conclusively that the spread diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis is significantly reduced where such facilities exist. I would work to counteract any negative campaigns of disinformation originating in the corporate-controlled media against these sites with a program of public and community education involving neighbourhood associations, advocacy groups, local levels of government, etc.

Question 3

In 2011 the average rent for a bachelor suite in Greater Victoria was \$676. The shelter allowance for someone on a disability pension or social assistance is \$375. This discrepancy is a primary contributor to homelessness in Greater Victoria. How do you plan to address it?

Carole James, NDP:

Under a BC NDP government income assistance rates will be pegged to inflation, and will immediately increase by \$20/month. The income-assistance earnings exemption will be doubled to \$400/month. People on income-assistance with children will also receive the BC Family Bonus of \$829/year – money that will not be clawed back. As noted above, we will also invest \$70 million in home care and complex care supports for seniors and people with disabilities, and \$35 million to provide residential care to seniors who can't live independently any more. We will also build up to 1,500 units of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families, seniors and individuals each year.

Jane Sterk, Green:

Our plan is to institute a Guaranteed Livable Income – see 1 above. GLI would provide sufficient income for a person to rent a place of their choice reducing the amount of money needed for dedicated social housing. BC Greens would, however, invest in supportive housing and in increasing the rental stock of housing for rent geared to income housing.

John Shaw, Communist Party of BC

The Communist Party would introduce strict rent controls and remove the "geographic increase" and "renoviction" loopholes. As well, it would re-establish the 'Rentalsman Office' with legislation to give such an office power to enforce rent controls, investigate landlord/tenant disputes and implement rulings.

Question 4

The Housing Procurement Action Plan released by the Coalition in March of 2012 estimates that the supportive housing required to end homelessness in Greater Victoria would cost approximately \$13.9 million per year. This includes capital costs as well as maintenance, support staff and admin fees. What kind of investment can you commit to in order to end homelessness in Greater Victoria by 2018?

Carole James, NDP:

We know that Housing First works – critical investments in both supportive housing and general affordable housing can make all the difference in a person's life. That's why an NDP government will invest in up to 1,500 additional units of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families, seniors and individuals each year.

In terms of operational costs for supportive housing, our plan includes practical steps forward towards better care for some of the most at-risk populations represented in the street community. Our investments in home care and residential care for seniors and people with disabilities, will also contribute towards meeting the needs of those groups. And for youth, we will fund a \$35 million youth mental health treatment and outreach strategy. We haven't designated which agencies will receive what funding – that comes after the election – but we have a firm commitment to increase front-line services at MCFD and CLBC.

Jane Sterk, Green:

See the answers above.

John Shaw, Communist Party of BC

A Communist government would commit to the construction of 5000 new social housing units annually in the province. It would extend support to co-op and other non-profit housing alternatives. Such public-funded projects would be completely under public and democratic control. So-called P3 "partnerships" will be a thing of the past, unless the public interest can be guaranteed.