

Strategic Dialogue on Poverty Reduction
Monday, May 10, 2010
Toronto, Ont.

Good evening.

I'm thrilled to be here tonight, and I hope I can contribute in some small way to the important dialogue in which you're engaged.

I must confess, though, to feeling a bit out of my depth tonight - addressing such an expert group and on such a weighty public policy issue.

I feel a bit like Tiger Woods giving a lecture on monogamy. What can I possibly say that will sound credible?

Fortunately, I am the father of three teenagers so I am well accustomed to being in the company of people who are much, much smarter than me.

I'm reminded almost daily that whatever little intelligence I once possessed is draining away like water through a sieve.

A couple of months ago I was invited to speak at a literacy event. I thought it would be instructive to talk about the books my own children were reading at the time.

My son Jacob told me he was reading **For Whom the Bell Tolls** by **Ernest Hemingway**.

I was impressed.

“Wow. Hemingway,” I said, “that’s neat.”

“Kind of ironic isn’t it,” my son said. “I’m a 14-year-old and I’m reading Hemingway and you’re a big-shot newspaper publisher and you’re reading Anne Rice.”

For the record, I’m not reading Anne Rice ... right now. But consider yourselves warned that the mental fare you may be offered tonight may be a rather thin gruel, indeed.

I’ll try this evening to give you some sense of the odyssey – and I use that word quite deliberately - on which my newspaper embarked when we embraced poverty as the public policy issue that would define and inform our newspaper.

In the process, I’ll share with you some of my own reflections on poverty, because the past several years also represent a very personal journey.

And, finally, I’ll offer some thoughts on the role media might play in the poverty discussion.

We start on Saturday, October 29, 2005.

On that day The Hamilton Spectator published a front page unlike any that the newspaper had previously published over its 160-year history.

To the best of my knowledge, no other newspaper anywhere has ever published a front page quite like that one.

The page was blank.

On our largest readership day of the week, on the real estate reserved for our most important stories and our premium advertisers, the folks who pay our bills, there was only white space...save for a short message to our readers.

The message read:

The stories have been removed from this page to remind us that nearly 100,000 children, women and men live in poverty in Hamilton, people whose stories rarely make the front page. We're going to change that.

And so we did.

In the years that have followed, The Spectator has devoted unprecedented journalistic resources to telling Hamilton's poverty story, including the appointment of a full-time 'Poverty Reporter' through 2006, and culminating most recently in publication of Code Red, a unique journalistic exploration of the relationship between poverty and health.

But it all started with that front page back in October of 2005 and a journalistic decision that left the Spec, and myself as its then editor-in-chief, open to sometimes pointed criticism within the Canadian media community, where the page was characterized by some as a dereliction of The Spectator's journalistic impartiality and objectivity, an unfortunate lapse into advocacy.

Our critics were correct, of course, except for their characterization of our decision as 'unfortunate'.

With our blank front page The Spectator did not lapse into advocacy, we leapt into it. In the most public manner possible, we said:

- That our newspaper found the prevalence of poverty in our community to be both offensive and unacceptable;
- Further, that poverty, in our estimation, was the single, largest issue confronting Hamilton, and the one upon which all other challenges hinged;
- And, finally, that as a media organization, and as a corporate citizen, we were committed to helping reduce poverty.

So how did we arrive at such a place?

I'm not sure I know. I probably shouldn't admit that, but that's the truth.

I've thought about it many times in the years since, and I've never been able to quite tease out an answer that neatly

reconciles with my own recollection of all that transpired in 2005.

Ultimately, I think The Spectator was swept along by a confluence of several different currents that were running through Hamilton at the time.

One of those currents was the journalistic personality of The Spectator itself, which has always been informed by a large measure of social responsibility. It's been that way as long as I can recall, and I go back almost the entire 160 years.

That's true of most newspapers to one degree or another, but exaggerated at The Spectator by Hamilton's own unique, working-class, community-centric, activist ethic.

We truly are a product of our environment; we are The Hamilton Spectator.

Second, as a news organization we had become over the preceding years increasingly conscious that poverty was a recurring – albeit often unspoken - theme in much of the news coverage appearing in our own pages every day.

Stories about health, homelessness, stories about crime, the degeneration of the downtown, the flight of corporate jobs: as an organization we were learning that poverty was the connective tissue between numerous, disparate stories.

Finally, the emergence of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction in 2005. By now you're well aware of that very special initiative – a community collaboration spearheaded by the Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton, one of the driving forces of which was Carolyn Milne, who introduced me tonight.

As important as all the currents were in moving the Spec towards the decision to publish a blank front page, it's clear to me that the latter was the most important.

Without the Roundtable and, specifically, people like Carolyn Milne and Joanne Priel at the City of Hamilton, I don't think any of what followed at the Spec would have happened.

In the years since, first as an editor and later a publisher, I've spent a lot of time thinking about poverty, and its impact on my community.

I don't claim to have gained any great wisdom, but I've become convinced of a couple things.

I'll share some of those observations with you tonight, but I ask you to be mindful that I see the challenge of poverty reduction through the prism of a lifetime working in mass communication.

My first thought is that we are undermined in our efforts to generate the needed societal will to tackle poverty in contemporary Canadian society by a surprising dichotomy.

We're buffeted by two significant, and seemingly contrary, headwinds:

- (i) The first is the dearth of Canadians who have experienced poverty firsthand;
- (ii) The second is the abundance of Canadians who have experienced poverty firsthand;

In the case of the former, the majority of Canadians of the generations that have followed mine have known only affluence. And, increasingly, that is transforming us into a society that is not rooted in personal knowledge of poverty or even want.

Certainly, Canadian society remains a 'caring' culture – witness the outpouring of support following the earthquake in Haiti - but increasingly it's missing the 'There-but-for-the-grace-of-God ...' sensibility that informed the thinking of previous generations.

We feel sorry for the poor – even as we judge them – but we really can't imagine how it is that they have come to lead such lives.

I see it in my own kids.

They are smart, thoughtful young people – compassionate and easily moved, motivated by sound values. But poverty is as foreign a landscape to them as the lunar surface.

Last week, my 16-year-old daughter Nicola (I swear, this is my last story about my kids) was complaining about how miserable her life is under her parents' reign of terror.

"I wish I had grown up when you did," she said. "You were so lucky."

I said, "Lucky? Nicky I grew up in a trailer."

"That's right," she said without missing a beat. "Your house had wheels under it. You were always going places."

I tell you that story, mostly for a cheap laugh at the expense of one of my children, but also to underline how difficult it is to understand poverty when you've not experienced it.

The best intentioned, most caring, individuals feel sympathy for the poor, but the experience doesn't really resonate. It lacks traction.

I'd suggest to you that sympathy is dangerous.

Sympathy marginalizes.

If we're going to make real inroads in poverty reduction, we need empathy, not sympathy.

Empathy is what prompts action and change. After a lifetime in media, I can assure you that the stories that most resonate with readers are those with which readers can

make a personal connection, ones in which they can see some part of their own life reflected.

An ‘empathetic’ community is a powerful tool in poverty reduction, and an obvious point of engagement for media.

I would tell you in Hamilton that we have a community of surprising empathy.

If the lack of personal experience with poverty is an obstacle with younger Canadians, the abundance of personal experience with poverty is as great an obstacle with the generations that preceded them.

The experience of people in middle-age, people of my generation, who have known poverty – even tangentially - in their own lives, distorts their perception and understanding of poverty in contemporary Canadian society.

In many cases, it gives people of my generation a misplaced confidence that they understand contemporary poverty.

I don’t think most of us do.

I used to tell people that I grew up poor.

I no longer make that claim because as modest as my family’s fortunes may have been – (and we’ve already established I had the great good fortune of living in a house

with wheels under it) – such a claim does a tremendous disservice to the experience of poverty today.

It's never been good to be poor. Being poor has always been the short end of society's stick.

But the truth is that to experience poverty in contemporary Canadian society is to experience a poverty that is particularly corrosive and marginalizing.

There are lots of reasons why being poor today is worse than it was when I was growing up. But I think a couple factors particularly recommend themselves.

One is the increasing urbanization of Canadian society. For many Canadians of my generation, whether you were growing up poor, rich or middle class you almost certainly regularly rubbed shoulders with folks of all social stripes.

That's appreciably less true today, especially in the large cities where most of us live, where it's quite possible for a poor child to have no interaction with anyone other than other poor children.

I think it's hard for us to understand how small your world can be when you are a poor child growing up in an inner city neighbourhood.

A few years ago, The Spectator was part of a project that involved taking school children from the inner city to

Bayfront Park, a spectacular green oasis on the west end of Hamilton Harbour.

Remarkably – unbelievably, really - many of the children had never before been to the water's edge even though most lived less than one kilometer from the park.

You can be sure those same children had never been to the Art Gallery of Hamilton, they'd never been on the campus of McMaster University, they'd never even been to any of the suburban malls ringing the city.

The world is very small, indeed, when you're a poor child. And so, too, is your horizon.

I think the second factor aggravating contemporary poverty is a bit harder to get our intellectual arms around but speaks volumes to the marginalization of poor people.

I'm talking about the increase in personal wealth enjoyed by Canadians overall over the past 40 years. So much affluence that Canadian society is almost unrecognizable to me from what it was when I was growing up.

How does that make poverty more corrosive?

It's the juxtaposition, I suppose.

With apologies to Charles Dickens and Scrooge, *'It is when abundance rejoices that want is felt most keenly.'*

I'm not saying it's easier to be poor when those around you are of more modest means, but it is true that to be poor when folks around you are increasingly affluent, perhaps even to excess, is particularly corrosive and damaging, and ultimately undermines the fabric of our society.

Now, let me tell you briefly about Code Red, the work of a brilliant reporter named Steve Buist.

Steve spent more than three years working on this project, which started with a simple question – What is the relationship between health and income in Hamilton?

To answer that, Steve – working in conjunction with McMaster University - did something that had never been done before.

He took 400,000 health records, generated by every death hospital admission and emergency room visit and in Hamilton over a two-year period, mapped the results against Hamilton's neighbourhoods, then cross-referenced them against a host of income and socio-economic measures.

This is what Steve found:

- There is a 21-year gap in life expectancy between Hamilton's best and worst neighbourhoods. In our worst neighbourhood, life expectancy is 65.5 years. If that neighbourhood was a country, it would rank 165th in the world;
- Seven neighbourhoods in Hamilton have higher incidence of low-birth weight babies than sub-Saharan Africa. Seven neighbourhoods in southern Ontario, in one of the richest countries in the world, have higher incidences of low-birth weight babies than sub-Saharan Africa;
- Residents in one Hamilton neighbourhood, slammed tight against the sprawling industrial heart of the east harbour, had 1,300 emergency room visits annually for every 1,000 residents. Contrast that with a more typical suburban Hamilton neighbourhood that had fewer than 100 visits per year.
- The neighbourhoods with the 10 highest rates of psychiatric related emergencies are all located in a single square in the inner city.

- Finally, I want to tell you about one neighbourhood in particular. In the mapping data, it was simply known as CT0050.
 - It's small – only 0.6 square kilometers, but home to almost 4,500 people.
 - Of 130 neighbourhoods in Hamilton, it ranked last.
 - CT0050 finished among the bottom 10 neighbourhoods in 14 of the 24 categories measured, including eight of the 12 health categories.
 - It had the highest rate of urgent care hospital admissions, the second-highest dropout rate from high school, and the third-highest rates of emergency room visits and overall hospital admissions.
 - A staggering one-third of all income for the neighbourhood comes not from wages but from government assistance.
 - More than 40 per cent of the children in CT0050 live below the poverty line.

That neighbourhood is a five-minute drive from my office. It is a 15-minute drive from my family's home. Even as I say that to you tonight, I am unable to reconcile the existence of those two different worlds, separated by mere kilometres.

Ultimately, I think Code Red's most important contribution to the poverty debate in Hamilton may be that it has allowed us to adopt a different vocabulary, to change our lexicon.

All these years we've been talking about poverty when, in fact, we should have been talking about health.

Health is an issue Canadians understand. And as a society, we have an absolute expectation of equity in health care. There is none of the moral ambiguity and intellectual conflict often found in discussions of poverty.

Indeed, it is the rare Canadian who would argue that it is appropriate or acceptable for any one segment of the population to endure wildly degraded health outcomes.

But that's exactly what Code Red has shown us. From conception, poor Canadians suffer health outcomes that are significantly poorer than other Canadians, and in many cases rival those in developing countries.

Code Red is really about a modern day plague.

Carolyn Milne recently introduced me to a concept from her days in nursing, a tactic used by health-care providers when it is essential that they achieve the full and undivided attention of a patient. She said you do that by presenting "information they can't walk away from."

I think, I hope, that Code Red truly is information that, collectively, we can't walk away from.

Code Red is not about poor people in Hamilton. It's about the impact of poverty on the health of Canadians everywhere.

We published Code Red over the course of a week last month. At its conclusion of the series, I told Steve Buist how proud I was of his work, and I noted that I thought it was the most important body of journalism that we had published in a generation.

What I didn't tell Steve is that as a publisher I think his work is important not simply because of what it's contributed to a crucial discussion in our community, but also for what it says about our newspaper.

I consider Code Red a bit of a book end, with our blank front page from 2005 sitting at the other end of the shelf. A book end, but not an ending.

Consider how much has changed since 2005:

- Certainly poverty persists in our community, but poverty is now front and centre in any debate of public policy in our city;
- And Hamilton's response to poverty has evolved into an intensely collaborative one. I think many of us in Hamilton would have been hard-pressed in 2004 to imagine an issue that would bring so many disparate voices to the same table.

I think The Spectator has made significant contributions on both those scores.

Equally interesting for me, though, is the transformation I see within my own organization.

Poverty has become so embedded into our journalistic consciousness, it's part of the newsroom's DNA – so much so that poverty naturally percolates to the top of our story file on a routine basis. Witness Code Red.

Equally interesting to me, though, is what I see throughout the whole organization, not just the newsroom.

When we launched the Poverty Project - the name we gave the journalism we embarked upon in 2005 - we were surprised by the number of staff who came forward to say, "What can I do?"

Not what can I do with the journalism, but what can I, personally, do to help reduce poverty in my community.

Remarkable things have flowed from that moment. Here is just one example:

The Spectator is now paired with an inner city school. On many days, our staff and their families can be found at Hess Street School serving breakfast, assisting with field trips, hosting parties or delivering knapsacks full of school supplies.

And students from the school are regular guests of The Spectator, whether competing in our ginger-bread house contest or attending community events sponsored by the paper.

In many different ways, Spectator staff are helping ensure that the world is not a small place for the children of Hess Street School.

There are other examples I could cite:

- the rebirth and rejuvenation of our United Way campaign,
- the participation of staff in various charities,
- an employee campaign to purchase playground equipment for an inner city park.

You'll have to take me at my word when I tell you that the publication of that blank page in 2005 was a seminal moment in the life of The Hamilton Spectator, the ripples of which are still washing ashore.

Thank you for your time tonight.

I'd be happy to take any questions.

