



# the Catalyst

Citizens for Public Justice

Spring 2022

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## Handcuffs, Shackles, and Jail Bars: What a Canadian Welcome Ought Not to Be

By Emilio Rodriguez

Canada prides itself on setting historic immigration targets and agreeing to resettle more refugees than most other countries. But Canada also continues to restrict asylum eligibility and increase restrictive border control measures, including holding asylum seekers in detention centres. Can Canada truly claim to be a safe haven while simultaneously transgressing the rights of those seeking safety or a better life?

Between April 2019 and March 2020, almost 9,000 people in Canada were held in immigration detention centres and provincial jails, including 138 infants and children. These individuals, and the many that have followed, are detained solely based on their immigration status, without committing any act that would warrant incarceration. Yet, they are handcuffed, shackled, searched, and can be subjected to solitary confine-

ment with no set release date.

Most Canadians, including some of those supportive of refugee and migrant rights, are unaware of this cruel reality. In response, CPJ recently partnered with Human Rights Watch to organize the February 2022 event, "[Human Rights Violations in Immigration Detention: An Interfaith Call to Action](#)," as part of the #WelcomeToCanada campaign. The event gathered members of different faith traditions from across the country to learn about immigration detentions and explore ways to effect change.

Religious communities have been at the forefront of welcoming refugees across Canada for decades and play a significant role in advocating against unjust practices that transgress human dignity. The session modeled the interfaith spirit of the call to action by featuring Christian, Jewish, and Muslim panelists.

CPJ members and interfaith partners have shown earnest support for this campaign. We coordinated an [interfaith statement](#) calling for the Government of Canada and provincial governments to abolish all immigration detention, which has gathered more than 150 signatures from individuals and organizations across the country. Several event participants have sent letters to the Minister of Public Safety, Marco Mendicino, calling for an end to these unjust and inhumane practices.

Handcuffs, shackles, and jail bars are the antithesis of a warm welcome. Canada must cease to criminalize migration and ought instead to respect the right to seek asylum. It is time for Canada to truly welcome people seeking safety or a better life.

Emilio Rodriguez is the Refugee Rights Policy Analyst at CPJ

# Reflections of a Retiring Social Justice Activist: Public Trust and Engagement

By David Pollock

Citizens for Public Justice has long been concerned with public trust. On March 11, 1976, Chief Justice Boris Laskin of the Supreme Court reversed a decision by the Federal Court of Appeal and validated the intervention claim by The Committee for Justice and Liberty Foundation (CJL, the forerunner to CPJ). He declared that there was a “reasonable apprehension of bias” in allowing Mr. Crowe (who was associated with the Gas Arctic-Northwest Project), to act for the National Energy Board in hearings concerning the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline. Chief Justice Laskin’s opinion both affirmed the work of the CJL Foundation and emphasized that there should “be no lack of impartiality of adjudicative bodies” such as the National Energy Board. Public trust, in the mind of Chief Justice Laskin, was paramount.

That focus contrasts sharply with the steady erosion that citizens around the world have experienced in public trust as study after study has confirmed.

It is a sad commentary that now in 2022, public accounting firms such as Deloitte have felt the need to issue directions to companies on the processes by which trust may be engendered or maintained.<sup>[1]</sup> Academic papers, too, have found need to discuss the hows and whys for governments to secure the trust of their constituent populations.<sup>[2]</sup>

For me, it is no mystery. Trust cannot be manufactured or cajoled. The demand for public trust is never quelled by propaganda or even hearings. Royal Commissions and consultation processes designed simply to allow input into public policy decisions are never enough.

Rather, if I feel safe as a child, if I am well fed, if I feel love and care, if I feel I can embrace the future with hope—all Maslow’s hierarchy of needs come to mind here—are these not the things that inspire trust?

Similarly, will a society not lose trust if its members do not experience the same confidence that their basic needs will be provided? If someone is afraid that they may disappear or be murdered with no recourse, if they fear that drinking water may lead to illness, if they cannot afford nutritious food for their child, if hunger lurks and healthcare is lacking, should they be expected to trust society or governments? If a refugee goes to an uncertain sleep at night fearful of bombs or intruders, if an immigrant’s education is not recognized as acceptable and hinders their chances to secure decent employment, if people of colour face racism or widespread discrimination in society, if I fear loneliness and poverty in old age, who will be surprised when the public expresses little faith in public institutions and even in one another?

The short, profound answer is that public trust is built by a society that weighs every decision by how it will affect the most vulnerable—and today that includes both people and nature.

Those of us who grew up in the 1960s were often upheld by the stirring words of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. who spoke about the “arc of the moral universe bending toward justice.” But today as I and my grandchildren seek ways to avert climate catastrophe, who might blame us for consciously wondering which way that arc of history is really bending: towards justice or disaster?

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Citizens for Public Justice’s mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing, and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God’s call for love, justice, and the flourishing of creation.

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The Sagrada Família in Barcelona, Spain has been under construction for nearly 140 years. Upon completion it will be the tallest church building in the world.

CPJ needs to keep working to draw attention to the worst injustices in our society and to propose meaningful and effective solutions based on the research it conducts. We must continue the work of holding public officials and governments accountable through public campaigns to rally and mobilize citizens. Persistent dialogue with government officials and elected members is imperative as is the need to create partnerships and networks to increase visibility and provide public pressure to challenge injustice. These are essential tools to build a society where public trust is the child of justice achieved.

One of my mentors always reminds me that we stand on the shoulders of others; that the work of justice is multi-generational and, like cathedrals of old, never built in the lifetime of just one builder. When I worked on justice issues within the national Anglican Church, the late, much-respected Archbishop Ted Scott once told me “ultimately, we are always called more to be faithful than successful.” Those words always grated on me because I self-identified as a practical idealist and I wanted (and still want) to see meaningful

progress and life-changing results. I still want to see campaigns and dialogues and boycotts, if needed, and marches, rallies and legal challenges to insist on accountability and progress toward justice. But I also recognize that activists must breathe in the truth that their God holds them, and all of creation, in the palm of a hand that never fails in its love and care. A God who challenges us to continue, to persevere, to change as we grow more aware of current challenges, and above all, to be steadfast purveyors of hope.

It is this gift of the audacity of hope that allowed The Committee for Justice and Liberty to join as inter-venor in the hearing before the Supreme Court; it is the same audacity of hope that permits CPJ to remain a faithful building block for public trust today. It is not just speaking truth to power that moves us forward; rather, it is the authenticity of the person herself or himself who communicates that truth which carries so much power—and that authenticity is to be shaped by a steadfast faith and passion for social justice.

In the end, it is a society characterized by justice and equity that breeds public trust. And it is hope,

grounded in faithful action, engagement, and love for one another that provides the catalyst for this change. That is what the future, like the past, invites and even pleads for us to do.

*\* David retired from his position at CPJ in April 2022, but doesn't intend to retire from activism.*

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Since 2010, David has worked with CPJ as the Coordinator of Finance and Administration. Prior to that, he was the Executive Director of the Pembina Institute, a member of the Economic Justice and Peace staff for the Anglican Church of Canada, and has served as a staff or board member for many ecumenical justice coalitions. He has worked on campaigns to end bank loans to the apartheid government of South Africa; fisheries issues on the East Coast; and climate agreements and corporate social responsibility issues, among others.





## Just Transition: Tending the Moral Summons

By Sue Wilson

An increasing number of voices in Canada are calling on the federal government to tackle climate change and inequality together.

At first glance, this might seem overly ambitious. Just addressing climate change alone will require big changes. To achieve the government's commitment to net-zero emissions as early as possible, we will need to both accelerate our transition away from the production and consumption of fossil fuels and to curtail carbon emissions from every part of the economy.

It's a lot. And that takes us to the crux of the matter. Solutions to climate change require profound economic shifts, from the current extractive economic model, rooted in exploitation of people, species, and the planet, to a low-carbon economic model, rooted in care for the planet, people, and all species. If these deep

structural changes are made with attention to mitigating and adapting to climate change as well as upholding the sanctity of all people by creating inclusive access to decent work, we will have a generational opportunity to set the world on a different trajectory.

### Just Transition

The term most often used to hold onto the integrated vision of climate justice and social justice is a "just transition." But different groups mean different things when they use the term.

For some, there is a narrow emphasis on support and skills-training programs for workers who will lose jobs in coal, oil, and natural gas sectors. For others, it is a wider concern for all workers, businesses, and communities in regions with economies that are currently dependent on fos-

sil fuel production. Finally, as mentioned, a growing number of groups understand a "just transition" as a way of integrating efforts to tackle climate change and inequality at the same time, by addressing their similar underlying causes.

For people of faith, the concept of a just transition is also a moral issue, often theologically rooted in an understanding of the sacredness of creation with its interconnected web of relationships. Our care for the earth and the climate is inextricably bound to our care for the whole human family and for all species on earth, all interacting endlessly in complex ways; all part of God's communion.

The breath-taking interconnectedness of life urges us onto a path of profound solidarity, intentionally shaping a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society and economy in and through our responses to the

climate emergency. That's why the moral summons is to lean into transformation and reconciliation; to choose the deep systemic change which enables us to face the challenges of climate change and inequality together.

### What might this look like in Canada?

An economy rooted in solidarity and interconnectedness will leave no one behind as it forges new patterns of relationship:

- The phase-out of the carbon energy sector will be combined with intense investment in clean energy, green technology, and skills training, to create widespread high-quality employment.
- All workers, in all regions and all sectors of the economy, will need the protection which comes from strong labour standards and regulations. This includes migrant workers, many of whom have been forced to leave homelands significantly impacted by climate change. Likewise, everyone will need easy and full access to adequate unemployment protections and skills-training.
- Indigenous communities, so many of whom are providing strong leadership in addressing climate change, will need the autonomy and resources to determine their own unique ways of moving toward a decarbonized future. At the

same time, Indigenous communities will need equitable access to financial resources and social protections to support the transition.

- Care of healthy ecosystems will create employment opportunities while enhancing resilience to climate change. Likewise, our commitments to care for one another, such as health care, elder-care and childcare, will create low-carbon jobs while making our societies more resilient.


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- Canada's high per capita emissions will make it incumbent upon us to be a place of welcome for climate change refugees, with strong support systems to help refugees thrive in our society and labour market. In addition, we must sharply scale up our commitments to fund adaptation and mitigation measures in the Global South, with additional funding for loss and damage.
- Governments will need more revenue to fund a comprehensive just transition. This means raising taxes on wealthy individuals and corporations, while also eliminating tax avoidance and loopholes, ensuring everyone pays their fair share.

These are just some of the threads of solidarity we can weave together to create a just transition if we are willing to choose a path of transformation. It is a critical moment, and one for which faith communities should be well prepared. In the coming weeks and months, as the federal government releases its plan for a just transition, will faith communities tend the moral summons? Will we be a catalyst for deep change?



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Sue Wilson, CSJ, is Executive Director of the Office for Systemic Justice (Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada).





# Our Voices Matter: Disability Advocacy

By Natalie Appleyard

An Interview with the *Our Voices Matter* Advisory Council by Natalie Appleyard, February 2022.

*This edition of the Catalyst focuses on the themes of public trust and accountability.*

## Our VOICES Matter

*CPJ's Natalie Appleyard asked members of the Ontario-based Our Voices Matter advisory council to share their thoughts on what could help build a sense of trust and accountability for people with developmental disabilities in Canada.*

**CPJ: Can you tell our readers a bit about Our Voices Matter (OVM)?**

**OVM:** *Our Voices Matter* is a group of people with developmental disabilities who come together to learn about and practice self-advocacy. Members are people who use the services of [Christian Horizons](#), a non-profit, developmental services organization. The Ontario *Our Voices Matter* advisory council meets monthly to share updates and provide information to the Christian Horizons Board of Directors. Members have opportunities to present at local and regional conferences, conduct research in partnership with staff members, provide input into organizational strategic planning and decisions, write for the Christian Horizons newsletter, and lead training sessions for Christian Horizons staff who support local *Our Voices Matter* members as advocates. The advisory council is also looking forward to talking to MPPs and other politicians.

**CPJ: CPJ envisions a society that reflects God's call for love, justice, and the flourishing of all creation. What are some important ways disabled and abled people can work together to ensure disabled people are included in this vision?**

**OVM:** The way the *Our Voices Matter* groups connect to Christian Horizons leadership and staff is an excellent example of this. The board and staff of Christian Horizons work with self-advocates who use Christian Horizons services to inform how and what services are delivered, conduct research (with service users acting as both researchers and participants), and collaborate on advocacy. Self-advocates work with the recruitment team and help to train staff.

Recently, Christian Horizons leadership, employees, and self-advocates worked together to choose a theme for 2022 for the organization: Growing together: Joy on the Journey. Members thought about what was important to them and their hopes and dreams for this year.

They expressed a desire to learn new things, volunteer, get jobs, and a real sense of excitement in anticipation of being able to gather with friends and family again.



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**CPJ: We know that disabled people are disproportionately impacted by poverty. What can that look like in day-to-day life?**

**OVM:** Most members of our group shared examples of how monthly income from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) isn't enough to pay for food, housing, medication, and other medical supplies.

Medications are often not covered by disability supports. Vitamins, certain prescriptions, catheters, feeding tube supplies, etc. are not covered. "When they say they cover everything, they legit don't cover everything. It upsets me and gets me really, really, frustrated," shares Elizabeth. Many disabled people end up using food banks.

The "Passport" funding program in Ontario really helps people who receive ODSP. The minimum you can get is \$5000 which is very helpful. As one member shared, "That's how I'm surviving." If ODSP offered that much, many would be alright. But not everybody qualifies for the Passport program. It is difficult to access and sometimes you really need to fight for it. And you still might not qualify.

Other times people have the money to pay for what they need but there are long delays to actually get the support. For example, a broken wheelchair might take months to repair because of wait times to get approval for the funding. "When my wheelchair was broken, I couldn't use my Dynavox because my headrest controls it. My Dynavox is a computer that speaks out loud for me, so without it I don't have a voice. That was very frustrating" shares Ray.

The group answering this question also notes that they are part of the population that do get support through agencies and government funding, and it is still not enough. "We are aware that as a group, even though our situation is difficult, there are tens of thousands of people with disabilities all across Canada who have even less support or no support at all" members share.

Ryan shares that "I actually sometimes get frustrated too, in life. Because I never know what's going on."

**CPJ: What would you like to see from the federal government that would build a sense of trust for people with disabilities?**

**OVM:** We would trust them more if they followed through with what they say. Unfortunately, as both Elizabeth and Ray feel, "they say things now, and then they don't do what they say." Ryan also notes, "I wouldn't mind if someone would talk to me about it."

Along with the Canada Disability Inclusion Action Plan, the Canada Disability Benefit income top-up would be a good step towards showing us that they care about people with disabilities.

Natalie Appleyard is the Socio-Economic Policy Analyst at CPJ



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# Emissions Reduction Plan is the First Serious Test of Canada's New Climate Law

By Julia Croome

The past 12 months have brought the reality of the climate emergency to the front door of people across Canada. Since this time last year, Canadians have experienced [killer heatwaves](#), [disastrous flooding](#), and [choking wildfires](#).

In the midst of this climate chaos, it can be hard to remember that the passage of the Canadian *Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act* (the Act) in June 2021 was [cause to celebrate](#). The Act establishes the legal foundation Canada has needed to bring consistency to climate governance, to ensure we never miss another climate target, and to put the country on a path to a net-zero future.

That said, implementing the Act effectively was always going to be the true test of Canada's resolve. The inaugural climate plan, mandated by the new legislation, known as the Emissions Reduction Plan (ERP), is the first piece of the Act's accountability mechanism to take shape.

## Canada's Climate Target

The federal government has set Canada's climate target for 2030 as a 40-45 per cent emissions reduction from 2005 levels. Canada has never

achieved a climate target, and without clear, bold, and ambitious planning, it will struggle to hit this one too.

To achieve Canada's emissions goals and meet the requirements of Canada's newest climate law, the ERP must represent an overhaul of Canadian climate planning. We cannot stress this enough: if the ERP is simply one of our old and immutable climate plans, rejigged to the new 2030 target, it will fail to satisfy the requirements of the Act and to provide the clear guidance required in a time of climate chaos.

Ecojustice, our partner organizations (including Citizens for Public Justice), climate activists, and people across Canada pushed political leaders for a strong climate law that resulted in the Act.

The focus of the new law is the year 2050, by which point Canadian emissions must be "net-zero" or less. This means that by the year 2050,

and every year after, human-made emissions must be cancelled out or balanced by humans taking necessary actions to remove those emissions.

## 2050 Means Action Now

2050 might appear like a long time off, but this is no easy task. Wide-ranging policies and plans implemented during the last five or so years have only just stopped Canada's emissions from increasing.

The Act could be the tool for Canada to meet the challenging task of achieving net-zero emissions by

2050. It does two important things:

First, it requires the government to set national emissions reductions targets on an ambitious path to the goal of net-zero emissions by

2050 based on the best available science. The first target is set for 2030, the next will be for 2035, then 2040, and 2045. This provides shorter-term goals to help set us on the

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**To achieve Canada's emissions goals and meet the requirements of Canada's newest climate law, the ERP must represent an overhaul of Canadian climate planning.**

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right path to reach that distant 2050 target.

Second, it requires the government to set about meeting those regular targets with immediate ambition, transparency, and accountability. All three of those words—ambition, transparency, accountability—are used so frequently in relation to government action that they can feel meaningless. The Act itself does a lot of work to translate these ideals into practical elements such as mandating the tabling of the first climate plan by the end of March 2022, setting the greenhouse gas emissions target for 2035 by the end of 2024, and assessing the progress of the 2030 plan by the end of 2025.

But the *how* of each of these elements is as important as the fact of their existence. That is why the forthcoming ERP is so important.

Ecojustice has made nine key recommendations, in consultation with our partners Climate Action Network, West Coast Environmental Law, Equiterre, and echoed by CPJ in our January 2022 submission to the Environment and Climate Change Canada consultation on the ERP. These recommendations fall into four categories:

### **1. The Modeling Underpinning Emissions Reductions Measures in the Plan**

Accurate modeling is central to reaching our climate targets. The core Canadian climate models are used by all levels of government and the private sector to inform decisions, so the futures they define end up strongly shaping policy decisions.

Our recommendations ask that modelers ground their work in a 1.5 degree Celsius world, not the world of destructive oil demand. We also ask that they harmonize their work so that they are speaking the same language, and come up with a plan to ensure they can explain to each other, and to the Canadian public, why they sometimes reach different

conclusions. In other words, to ensure that our models are as robust as possible.

In addition, the authors of the plan have to be transparent, showing Canadians the assumptions behind the modeling, so that those assumptions can be challenged and tested.

### **2. The Structure and Format of the Plan**

Secondly, the Act set the 2050 target and committed to employing accountability mechanisms to reach it, and the milestone targets along the way. Accountability must be built into every element of this framework, down to the structure and format of the ERP itself.

The elements of the plan must be trackable and “SMART”—specific, measurable, audience-specific, realistic, and time-bound—so that the Canadian public can easily assess their progress. If the ERP looks like previous climate plans, which bury the actual measures in so much text that even the most dedicated reader can barely make out what is what, the ERP will surely fail to meet the requirements of the Act.

### **3. Data Collection, Analysis and Synthesis**

Thirdly, the problem of climate change is complicated, detailed, and crosses every discipline: physical sciences, energy systems, economics, social sciences, and political science. Currently, there are significant data gaps that impact how we assess and address climate change.

Data collection methods must be improved, and the ERP must acknowledge and plan to fill these gaps. The data must not only be complete, but it also must be understandable. We know that there are better ways to talk about climate change, ways that cut across jargon and communicate the true nature of the problem, and the solutions, to Canadians. The ERP must take a page from international best practices as well as use

and develop those communication tools, and indicators.

### **4. Necessary Immediate and Ambitious Action**

Lastly, Canada’s goal of net-zero GHG emissions by 2050 is fundamentally tied to safe levels of warming: a maximum rise in global temperatures of 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-Industrial levels. The Act, and our international obligations, recognize that limiting climate change to 1.5 degrees Celsius requires immediate and ambitious action. The ERP must use as ambitious a target as possible.

The current range of 40-45 per cent below 2005 levels must be treated as 45 per cent at a minimum in the ERP. In fact, this target still falls far short of Canada’s fair share, which is at least 60 per cent below 2005 emissions levels.

The interim objective for 2026 in the ERP must be ambitious in and of itself. And the ERP must clearly explain how its measures and strategies will put Canada on an ambitious pathway to reaching the 2050 net-zero goal.

### **Time for Ambitious Action**

The climate emergency is more real for people across Canada than ever before. Political leaders must produce an ERP that matches the urgency of the situation. We hope that the government will continue to engage with the public on this key issue. In the meantime, Ecojustice will, as always, continue to push those in power to be bold and ambitious to chart a path to a safe and sustainable climate future.

*A version of this article was first published at Ecojustice's website in February, 2022.*

Julia joined Ecojustice in early 2016. She has litigated environmental cases at all levels of court and works intensively on Canadian climate law reform.





# Is Canadian Healthcare Truly Universal? Health Inequities Based on Immigration Status

By Emilio Rodriguez

Canadian communities are comprised of individuals with different immigration status, coexisting in the same spaces and sharing similar experiences and realities. For some, the attributes of “permanence,” that Citizens and Permanent Residents have, or “transience,” for those with expiry dates on their Canadian documents, bear little significance in the realms of community and daily living—we share meals and holidays, attend the same university classes, work together on professional projects, and even envision our futures in the same land.

Yet, the existing legal categories create tangible lines of separation that inhibit the progress and prosperity of Canadian residents living under a forced temporariness—one that welcomes their contributions without granting them the benefits of “permanence.” This is evident in the barriers that thousands of immigrants and refugees face in accessing public health insurance in Canada.

Universal access to healthcare is one of the most widely supported principles in Canadian public policy, with the approval of roughly [nine in ten Canadians](#). Yet, it is estimated that [around 500,000 residents in Canada live without health insurance](#), in most cases due to barriers related to immigration status.

Holding universal access to healthcare as a fundamental Canadian value, while simultaneously denying access to half a million people who live in Canada, is more than a simple omission—it delineates who

belongs here and who does not.

These disparities stem from a conscious decision to strip away health benefits from individuals who, for all practical matters, reside in Canada and intend to do so for the long-term. For example, landed immigrants (such as permanent residents, refugees, and some temporary workers) undergo a three-month waiting period before provincial health benefits come into effect in certain provinces, like Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia.

Others experience longer term barriers. For instance, in Ontario, individuals within the following categories all lack access to healthcare: international students; temporary foreign workers who are unemployed, between contracts, or on remote work contracts with employers outside of the province; those with pending immigration applications; and undocumented migrants.

In the case of Seasonal Agricultural Workers, a category that is already subject to coercive employment practices with serious consequences for health and safety, their medical coverage needs to be coordinated by their employer, either through the provincial government or private insurance. In fact, a [2015 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives](#) found that 92% of migrant farm workers eligible for provincial health insurance were not signed up by their employer. Moreover, staff from provincial health agencies and health clinics are left to figure out the complex set of exceptions and condi-

tions on their own, which can result in denial of care even to individuals who are eligible—as was reported in 2017 when refugees were barred from receiving healthcare by practitioners despite eligibility under the Interim Federal Health Program.

The solution is to [provide all temporary residents full access to publicly funded healthcare](#)—untied to their employer or employment status—for as long as their residence in Canada lasts, and to eliminate waiting periods for landed permanent residents. There is no justification to deny fundamental rights and social benefits to individuals based on their immigration status. Even from a purely financial standpoint (which should not supersede human rights obligations), these residents pay taxes and contribute abundantly to the growth of Canada’s economy, funding the same programs that exclude them.

The barriers to access publicly funded healthcare not only affect the individuals who are uninsured, but also put health professionals at odds with their duty to provide care. Amid a global pandemic, these restrictions create further vulnerability and [may exacerbate medical problems](#), to the detriment of uninsured individuals and the healthcare system itself.

Emilio Rodriguez is the Refugee Rights Policy Analyst at CPJ





# Pandemic Benefits are Punishing those with the Lowest Incomes

By Leila Sarangi

Within the first few weeks of the pandemic, the federal government moved quickly to provide income supports to people across the country. A new program, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), was created because it became quickly apparent that the existing system, Employment Insurance, was inadequate to deal with the scale of unemployment. However, fallout from design flaws and lack of policy adjustments over time has resulted in significant hardship for individuals and families with low income who received the CERB.

We have heard time and time again that the pandemic has negatively impacted marginalized communities disproportionately, and the consequences of receiving federal income pandemic benefits are no different. The CERB rolled out quickly, in the first few weeks of the pandemic. Eligibility criteria was kept to a minimum in order to speed up the process, with applicants providing an attestation that they were eligible. Its purpose was to deliver \$2000 per month to individuals who lost work due to pandemic restrictions.

From the outset, however, there were challenges. Confusion for some around changing eligibility requirements led to people applying for the benefit even though they did not meet the criteria. In some cases, people were encouraged to apply by the Canada Revenue Agency, by social service workers, by community workers, and by the government's promise to leave no one behind in their pandemic response. Others met the criteria but did not have access to the documentation required later on, for example, those who receive hon-

oraria for their services and others whose employers would not issue records of employment. Some who were receiving social and disability assistance were told they must apply for the CERB because legislation mandates that one must exhaust all sources of income. And still others with very low or no incomes and who lost their community support as organizations closed overnight, applied out of sheer desperation.

Anyone earning even one dollar less than the \$5000 minimum requirement in the previous twelve months was deemed ineligible. Those who received the CERB and were later deemed ineligible have now been saddled with thousands of dollars of federal debt—even those with low incomes who used the benefit to stay safe at home.

The CERB triggered claw backs to crucial income benefits for low and moderate-income individuals and families. It was clawed back almost immediately from social and disability assistance programs, despite the federal Minister of Employment, Workforce Development, and Disability Inclusion encouraging the provinces and territories not to. At the same time, those living in rent-gated-to-income (RGI) housing where income is reported monthly (for example, in Toronto), rents increased by 30% of the benefit amount.

During tax filing the following year, the CERB was included in calculations for federal benefits including the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and Canada Child Benefits

(CCB). The GIS is a benefit to support seniors who have to work beyond the age of 65, and who make less than \$19,464 as a single or \$25,728 in a couple. The \$5,000 earnings exemption was not applied in this case even though CERB was replacing income. 183,420 of the lowest income seniors had their GIS reduced or completely clawed back as a result of accessing the CERB.

Many seniors shared their stories of losing their housing, their small businesses, taking loans from family, lines of credit, and predatory payday lenders, and how they went without food, medications and basic necessities. After months of hardships experienced by seniors, the federal government has promised to fast track a one-time repayment and introduced new legislation to ensure pandemic benefits do not get calculated into future GIS payments. At the time of writing, this legislation is still being debated in the House of Commons and the repayment process is not fully clear.

There has been no announcement to address claw backs from other income benefit programs or repayment amnesty. If the federal government truly wants a recovery that leaves no one behind, they must learn from the good and the bad impacts of the CERB and apply them immediately to people with low incomes.

Leila currently serves as the Director of Social Action with Family Service Toronto and National Director of Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty.



## Accountability and Stewardship in Indigenous Contexts

By Tony Snow

Growing up, the environment was always Mother Earth, *Yethka Makoche* (a.k.a. Stoney Country). We existed within the rhythms of this land, its seasons and times of the moon: intimate times, related to the world around us where everything had a name and purpose. The names told us how we related, and how we belonged. The landscape was alive with our stories, experiences, histories and legends. During our most sacred times, at the height of nature's bounty, we performed our sacred sundances: a time of annual collective prayer for *Yethka Makoche*. Our traditional societies centered themselves around these prayer times, understanding the needs of creation and what it was calling us to do.

As a descendent of the Stoney Nakoda people, sometimes called *Assinipwat* ('Stone People' in Anishinaabe), sometimes called 'Mountain Poets,' or 'People of the Shining Mountains,' our belonging is spoken in our Creation Stories, and dwells within the creation stories of our siblings: the Buffalo, the Bear, the Elk, the Moose, and Eagle. These stories spoke to the living spirits of earth, wind, water, and fire. In this land we lived according to nature's plan, with respect for all creation (both animate and inanimate) because everything was imbued with spirit. To our people, everything was alive, and everything existed in balance.

For the Yethka people, the public trust we held was a collective responsibility that, despite our differences, meant we agreed to uphold the collective good for the sake of our survival. This involved stewardship, recognizing our impact and our legacy for the next generation as a con-

sideration for the wellbeing of the next seven generations. This meant that no one voice or collective group held sway, but the interest of future generations and those who could not speak for themselves (i.e. the trees, waters, air, mountains, etc.) would all be considered. Our ancestors left their instructions in ceremonies, songs, and spiritual protocols that connected us to their memory through oral traditions. They spoke through time, through millennia, in these messages dutifully remembered more accurately than most written accounts today.

Our accountability was not only to one another as relatives and collective family, but as a sacred trust that gave guidance to future leaders who would be dealing with different issues, different complications, in different times. Our stories were technologies through which our parables, legends, and sacred songs gave us tools to interpret our Elder's wisdom into actionable practices.

Today we live on the precipice of our assured self-destruction through climate change. Many faith communities turn to answers in the ideas of original sin and judgment in the reading of prophetic works like the Book of Revelation. It is from this perspective that misinterpretation and misrepresentation infer our complicity and cause us to give up our own agency saying: "it's in God's hands..."

But that is not what our Indigenous wisdom traditions say. If anything, the world we live in, with worldwide pandemics and nuclear brinkmanship, teaches us that our actions (and inactions) lead us to predictable self-fulfilling consequences.

I am reminded that as talks broke down at COP25, we could see where political machinations had once again suspended action with the appeals of lobbyists and industry actors. These same groups would again step into the debate at COP26 to rewrite the final drafts of agreements before they were voted on by delegates.

While COP26 marked a tipping point, it highlighted that the interests of the minority still stood against those of everyone else experiencing the catastrophic impacts of global ecological change. It showed that the tried-and-true practices of stall and delay were no longer enough and that the real work happens at home, in our communities and governments.

This has been the focus of Indigenous wisdom keepers on the ground who seek to balance our interests (and needs) with what we are asking of creation.

For Indigenous people, balancing our way of life and the life of the planet is our primary concern. Our stories, ceremonies, and wisdom traditions tell us the seriousness of our relationship with the earth. And only by being involved and actively participating in the discussions can we begin to reconfigure our collective thinking and global priorities. Until then, without a full implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we will continue to struggle.

Tony Snow is a member of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation and the Indigenous Minister for Chinook Winds Region (Treaty 7, southern Alberta) in the United Church of Canada.

