

Take The Welfare Time Limit Off the Books

by *Shelagh Day*

The Government of British Columbia now says that, over the next year, only 339 people will be affected by the 24-month time limit on welfare—the rule intended to limit “employable” welfare recipients to two-years of support during any five year period.

On Friday, the Government created a new exemption—the 25th. Now those who follow their employment plans and are seeking work will be exempted from the 24-month time limit. Though this is an encouraging development, the Government still has to go the full course and remove the time limit from the books.

The announcement of this new exemption is a back-handed admission by the Government that applying a time limit to welfare does not work. The message of the time limit legislation is that if you have not gotten a job in 24 months, you are, by definition, “unwilling” to work, lazy, a malingerer, and should be cut off or have your welfare reduced as a penalty. Premier Campbell has been bent on persuading the B.C. public to treat those who are poor as market failures who can be punished and abandoned with impunity.

But this is a false and mean stereotype. People who are poor are not lazier than people who are rich. They are competing for marginal jobs in a provincial economy where about 200,000 people are unemployed. The 25th exemption essentially acknowledges this; it admits that looking for a job does not necessarily mean finding one. It is also an acknowledgement that no one “chooses” to be on welfare—social assistance incomes are deplorably low and living on them is hard.

The 24-month time limit was never necessary. Even before this new “exemption”, the 24-month rule was completely redundant. The *Employment and Assistance Regulation* already permits the Government to cut recipients off welfare for failing to follow their employment plans, or for refusing to accept work. What happened last week is that the Government retreated in the face of mounting pressure from community organizations, churches, unions, city councils, social policy experts, and individuals who let the Government know that the 24-month rule is both impractical and morally repugnant.

British Columbia is the only province in Canada that has ever placed an arbitrary time limit on welfare eligibility. It represents a serious break with Canadian social policy of the last fifty years. Canada has built a somewhat patchy, but important social safety net, based on an understanding that collectively we should provide everyone with protections against “universal risks to income”, that is, against those natural and market events that can make any one of us unable to provide for ourselves and our families - sickness, disability, old age, child-bearing, unemployment and underemployment. We have agreed that Canada should distribute its resources in a way that provides a social minimum when these events threaten our security, either temporarily or permanently.

Social assistance is the very bottom of the social safety net, available only to those who are in the most extreme need, who have no employment, and who have exhausted their savings and any other benefits to which they may be entitled.

Cutting people off social assistance - not because they are no longer in need, but because their period of need has lasted longer than the government would like, is bad policy, whether it affects thousands or 339 or one. It displays a complete disregard for the humanity of those who are poor.

The Government should apologize to all the welfare recipients in British Columbia for the stress and anxiety they have caused by having this 24-month rule hanging over them for the last two years. Like the disability review, this policy has caused heartache and harm to the most vulnerable people, for no good purpose. The Government should now notify all the thousands of people living in anxiety that the time limits do not apply to them, and the 339 people at risk should also be notified and their right to appeal assured..

Most importantly, the Government should just take the 24-month time limit off the books. A rule that requires 25 exemptions is a feeble rule. And a rule which, to save the Government's face, requires an exemption which guts the rule itself—as the 25th exemption does—needs to be scrapped. So long as the rule remains, some vulnerable people will remain at risk.

Time limits on welfare cannot work. They are not consistent with Canadian social policy traditions. And they violate basic human rights values that Canadians share, and that are expressed in both the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and in international human rights treaties that Canada has ratified. The Government should get the time limits off the books.

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