

Submission
to the Standing Committee on Finance
on
Pre-Budget Consultations
by
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- Northern Region -

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Preamble

The Public Service Alliance of Canada represents upwards of 12,000 workers across the three northern territories. The bulk of the membership is employed by the Territorial governments but we also represent employees of the Federal and Municipal governments, a number of non-governmental and para-governmental organizations. We also represent workers in the private sector, for example: employees of BHP-Billiton working at the Ekati diamond mine in NWT; Nuna Contracting involved in the Giant Mine Reclamation Project and many more.

We recognize that the PSAC has filed a brief before the committee already. We strongly feel that the situation in the North is sufficiently different from the rest of the country that it warrants its own presentation to the Committee. We believe that the Committee must feel the same way, as it is taking the time to stop in Yellowknife as part of its national consultation tour.

This document does not deviate from the one filed by John Gordon, National President of the PSAC. On the contrary, it augments and reinforces it especially on the issues of “**Unemployment**” and “**Government Involvement in the Economy**”.

Unemployment in the region

Official figures on unemployment for the North are generally higher than those for the rest of the country, but these do not reflect reality. Real unemployment in this region is easily two to three times higher than official figures. Rural areas are worse than urban; the situation in NWT is worse than the Yukon and Nunavut is the most affected. Anecdotal information would suggest that a full one third of the potential workforce in Nunavut is unemployed, and this is a conservative estimate. Aboriginal people, Inuit, First Nations and Métis in all three territories are especially affected by this scourge.

As a result, a vast segment of the population is living in crushing poverty. This is having devastating effects on every aspect of peoples' lives: health, education, family relations, self-esteem.

If these conditions existed in the Provinces, all levels of government would declare a state of emergency and immediately instate a rescue package in the billions of dollars. These conditions have existed on a systemic basis in the North for decades. Some intervention has taken place, but nothing near the scale of what is required to provide significant relief and recovery and to bring people of the North on par, economically, with the rest of Canada. Nunavut, in particular, has been grossly under funded.

Currently, Canadian workers everywhere are suffering a historical surge in unemployment and loss of jobs. Even under these conditions, the rates of unemployment in the North are several times higher than in the Provinces.

Governmental Involvement in the Economy

Compounding the problem is the fact that a lot of workers who actually have jobs can not meet the prices for food and housing. The price of good, nutritious food in many communities north of 60 is three to four times what it is in the rest of Canada. And yet, peoples' incomes are only a fraction of the average of Canadians. The consequences are utterly disastrous. Northerners, especially aboriginal peoples, are plagued with health problems that put them on par with some of the poorest parts of the world. This is unconscionable in a country as rich as Canada.

Our recommendations for the North to the Finance Committee:

An immediate increase of transfer payments to each of the three territories in the following range:

- Nunavut: 50%
- Northwest Territories: 20%
- Yukon: 20%

The increased funds should be, in order of priority, targetted to:

1. Housing
2. Food subsidies
3. Health and Social Services

Unless these areas receive a substantial financial boost from the central Canadian government, it will be impossible for Northeners to attain the level of functionality they need to have in order to fully participate in the industrial developments that are being contemplated by industry and governments now and for the future. One can not learn and prosper unless one has a decent house to live in, nutritious food to eat, good health and a stable, healthy family and community to live in.

Conclusion:

There is a cost to everything we do, but there is also a larger cost to everything we DO NOT do. The neglect of populations in the North, especially of Aboriginal peoples, carries a huge human cost. Now is the time to deal with this long standing injustice and demonstrate that Canada cares about ALL of its citizens, no matter how far they live from the capital.