

Harmony Raine
for Bill

Walk for Peace, The
Environment & Social
Justice. Kamloops, 2016.

It is a privilege to be here.

We're all here today because we want to protect and advance peace, the state of the environment, and social justice.

Canadians have made a lot of progress in our battles against racism, sexism, discrimination against people with disabilities, homophobia and transphobia. But Canada is not doing well in terms of economic justice. Poverty is posing the greatest challenges to peace, the environment, and social justice.

Four million Canadians are living in poverty; with about a million so destitute they have to rely on charity and food banks in order to survive.

Aboriginal people on reserves are far worse off than other Canadians.

They often live in isolated or northern communities where they have an extremely high cost of living, and housing that is somewhere between inadequate and deplorable. They lack

access to government services, health care, and education – even at the high school level. They have the highest rates of unemployment, depression, suicide, and poverty; and a child poverty rate that is double that of non-aboriginal communities.

Despite the fact that Canada has seven per cent of the world's renewable freshwater, many Canadian communities are experiencing a water crisis. As of January 2016, there were 1,838 drinking water advisories in effect across the country. More than 500 of these were in BC, and 139 were in First Nations communities that fall under federal jurisdiction.

Some water advisories have been in effect for years.

The First Nations community of Shoal Lake, Manitoba has been under a boil-water advisory for almost 20 years, even though it is situated beside an aqueduct that provides safe water to Winnipeg. The people of Shoal Lake must rely on bottled water, which is trucked in and strictly rationed.

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, access to safe water for drinking and sanitation became an **essential human right** in 2010.

When presenting BC's 2016 Budget, Finance Minister Mike de Jong stated: "The measure of any society is reflected in the degree to which it is willing to help the most vulnerable." With this in mind, BC is failing.

Our children are among our most vulnerable citizens. Canada's child poverty rate is alarmingly high; and British Columbia has the highest rate of child poverty in Canada, with approximately 20% of BC's children living in poverty. The rate is double for Indigenous children, at 40 per cent.

One in seven Canadians using homeless shelters is a child.

Poverty among senior citizens and military veterans is also an area of deep and serious concern.

There has been a freeze on social assistance rates for people **without** disabilities since 2005.

For people **with disabilities**, an increase in benefits of a measly \$77 per month was announced in the budget after a **nine year freeze**. The cost of living has certainly not been frozen for the past nine years.

One third of all food bank users in BC are people who receive disability benefits.

To add insult to injury, the BC Liberals clawed back subsidized bus passes and other transportation subsidies for people on disability assistance, virtually wiping out their so-called "raise" while Christy Clark uses private jets to fly back and forth to Kelowna at a massive cost to taxpayers. It's a slap in the face for hardworking citizens, seniors, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty who have to rely on public transit.

Workers have also become part of Canada's vulnerable population.

In August 2014, 112,000 private sector jobs in Canada simply disappeared. Governments are consistently eliminating public sector jobs, which results in service cuts to Canada's most vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Although Canadian workers have been making **mandatory** contributions into Employment Insurance for over sixty years, they are increasingly being denied of their EI benefits. In fact, only about 38% of workers are able to access EI funds.

Despite persistent, increasing unemployment in this country, governments are continuing to allow big businesses to exploit the low-cost labour of temporary foreign migrant workers.

This practice drives wages and benefits down for ALL workers. It weakens our economy, threatens worker health and safety, and undermines legal immigration.

Canada was built by the work of immigrants, who should be granted full citizenship and democratic rights, equal participation in society, equal access to medical and legal assistance, decent wages, and safe workplaces.

But at least we have gender equality, right? Wrong.

In a 2015 study, Canada placed just 30th out of 145 countries evaluated for health, education, economic, and political equality between men and women.

Based on average annual earnings, women earn just 66.7% of what men earn for doing work of equal value.

More than half of Canadian families are headed by women as single parents or as the primary or sole wage earner.

Pay equity is not a "women's issue." It is an equity issue that affects women, men, and children. When women work outside the home and earn a decent wage, everyone benefits. Families have access to better housing, transportation, food, necessities, and education. When men and women are more able to balance the

work of raising children and tending to the household more equitably, the burden to be the primary or sole wage earners for the family is lifted off of men, and allows them to be more involved in the care of their children.

Social justice means that we should all have "enough" to meet our basic survival needs, but we don't. It means that everyone should be able to live and work in dignity and experience equal life chances; but we know this is not the case.

British Columbia is the most expensive province, with the highest rates of poverty and child poverty in the country. More than one third of children living in poverty are in a household where at least one family member has full time, year-round employment. Full time workers who make the minimum wage of \$10.45 per hour are living nearly \$6000 below the poverty line! These are not college students living with their parents, as Christy Clark would have us believe. They are adult workers trying to support families. The average annual cost of child care for a toddler in British

Columbia in 2012 was almost \$11,000. That's double the average cost of university tuition in BC.

DOUBLE!

We have a housing affordability crisis and extremely high rates of homelessness – yet, BC has no poverty reduction plan and no plan for accessible, affordable child care.

Too many Canadians are living in poverty. Too many of us are working hard just to maintain a low- to modest standard of living. Too many of us are unemployed and underemployed, working in low-paying jobs, and working long hours in two or more jobs. Too many of us are being forced to use homeless shelters and food banks.

We should be doing better, and **can** do better.

We can start by voting.

We can vote for a progressive government that that will fight for policy changes that promote economic, environmental, and social justice for all Canadians.

We can all support initiatives that would boost the minimum wage to at least \$15/hour, preferably to a living wage. It's good for families, and the economy.

We can support unions and other organizations who are pushing for a \$10 per day universal child care plan, which has proven successful in Quebec and elsewhere. These programs provide children with adequate care and can help get more parents into the workforce; which goes a long way in alleviating poverty for families and lifting more children out of poverty.

We can also vote with our wallets. Due to globalization, all kinds of jobs in developed countries like Canada have been eliminated or outsourced to parts of the world where people are forced by poverty and desperation to work for extremely little pay in unsafe and inhumane conditions. This is not global social justice.

We can contribute to the local economy by supporting local and small businesses, and by trying to purchase ethically produced and fair trade goods rather than pouring our money into big businesses that think nothing of exploiting workers here on Canadian soil, and keeping people in developing countries trapped in sweat-shops for the sake of maximizing their profits. These businesses receive massive tax cuts, and some evade taxation through offshore accounts.

We can't expect to have social justice when the rich continue to get richer on the backs of working people and disenfranchised individuals living in poverty.

Many of our basic human rights are being eroded by governments, public policies, and massive corporations that put profit before people and profit before the environment. We don't just "get" rights, we have to fight to get them, and then continue working to protect, maintain, and advance them.

We can't have peace without social justice, and we stand to lose everything if we don't care for the environment, which is in serious distress. So we have to fight for the environment and climate justice as well.

Governments and big businesses are trying to pit the economy against the environment by approving projects that have potentially devastating health and environmental consequences. They are trying to convince us that this is the only way to create jobs. But it **is** possible to create greener jobs and bolster economies **without** destroying the environment.

We all share in the responsibility of making this world a better place and ensuring that there is something left of it for future generations.

We must act in solidarity and demonstrate our collective commitment to fight for peace, human rights, the environment, and social justice.