

British Columbia: Tens of thousands may be cut off welfare next April

By Keith Jones
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A British Columbia government document estimates that as many as 29,000 people could be kicked off welfare next April. That is when a new time-limit provision that prohibits employable persons without dependants from drawing welfare for more than two years in a five-year period comes into effect.

Murray Coell, the Human Resources Minister in BC's Liberal government, had repeatedly refused to make any estimate as to the number of persons affected by the time limit, but a document prepared by his officials was leaked to the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP). Coell's response has been to dismiss the figure, saying it includes single mothers and others whose benefits will be reduced when they surpass the two-year limit, but who won't be entirely deprived of government assistance.

For his part, Premier Gordon Campbell has reiterated his government's determination to implement the time limits, saying that those faced with the cut-off should find work. "People that are employable, that may face that deadline, can have jobs if they want...labour, construction, truck-driving jobs." Campbell's remarks fly in the face of economic reality. Not only are many of those whom welfare authorities have deemed "employable" suffering from various physical and mental disabilities. British Columbia's economy has been rocked by the slowdown in the US, a summer of forest fires, and US tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber. Statistics Canada reports that on a seasonally adjusted basis, BC's unemployment rate was 9.1 percent in September.

In early 2002, the Liberals implemented major changes to welfare including benefit cuts and the reduction or elimination of various allowances for shelter, transport, and other basic needs. Of particular importance were new provisions barring young people

who have recently left the family home from any right to welfare and the two-year limit.

While all provinces have moved in recent years to tie entitlement to welfare benefits, or at least the benefit amount to participation in workfare schemes, British Columbia is the first to try to impose time limits under which benefits will be entirely cut off. Moreover, in contrast with many states in the US where similar bans have been imposed, the Liberal government has done so while sharply curtailing support for programs aimed at providing welfare recipients with training, daycare and other job-related support.

According to a report issued by the BC branch of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, "While the BC government has borrowed many policy ideas from the US, it has chosen to import only the policy 'sticks' that push and keep people off welfare (such as time limits, tough sanctions, workfare and tighter eligibility rules). None of the policy 'carrots' or supports that help people make the transition to paid employment (such as enhanced child care, transportation support, increased minimum wage, enhanced training and educational opportunities, and the expanded use of earnings exemptions) have been adopted."

"This is a first in Canada, making people not eligible for welfare at all based on a time limit," says Michael Goldberg of the Social and Research Planning Council of BC. "In fact, I find it hard to imagine that the government will actually follow through and do this. I mean, the vast majority of these people are very, very hard to employ. Yet come April 1, the government is basically saying: 'Okay, go out and starve now.'"

In fact, the BC Liberals have given every indication that they will implement the time limit, using the most vulnerable to demonstrate their resolve to make BC "internationally competitive." Coell has made light of

the cut-off, countering NDP warning of a massive increase in homelessness and the threat of increased crime with claims that the “NDP would love a return to the days when socialism on demand for welfare was there.” In fact, as even the right-wing *Vancouver Sun* concedes, “many of the changes” the Liberals have made to welfare—including reduced benefits and expanded workfare—“merely ratcheted up reforms set in motion by the NDP,” which held office in Canada’s west coast province for a decade beginning in 1991.

Welfare advocacy groups report that the impending cut-off is already causing great psychological stress. Jacquie Ackerly, the director of Together Against Poverty Society, told the *Victoria Times-Colonist* that her office is regularly fielding requests from persons fearful for their future come next April. “Most of these people are not really employable or the kind of jobs they could do don’t exist anymore.” As a result, they are being compelled to consider dangerous options, including “risky or illegal behaviour like prostitution or selling drugs. “The one that concerns me the most,” adds Ackerly, “is people considering suicide.”

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