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EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC. MEMORANDUM

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TO	Donna Nixon
CONCERNING	Child Poverty Focus Groups: Revised Conclusions
FROM	Frank L. Graves

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Awareness and Images of Child Poverty

- Concern with child poverty is high but specific awareness of the issue as part of national social policy agenda is only moderate.
- There is a consensual minimal definition of child poverty as the absence of basic life needs. These are interpreted as biophysical needs such as shelter, nourishment and clothing. Some participants endorse a broader definition of basic needs to include emotional and socio-psychological needs.
- Despite only moderate awareness, most participants agree this should be a national priority; open-ended discussions are less positive than survey research on this point. It is, however, important to bear in mind that *any* government-sponsored proposal or idea is contaminated by the pervasive hostility and mistrust currently directed towards governments. Against this backdrop we would interpret public concern as strong.
- There is a general belief that this problem is worsening, although many economically secure point to this increase as only relative and artificially

inflated by stiffer contemporary standards. For some this problem is exacerbated by a sense that the overall standard of living for ordinary Canadians has been in decline. People also seem to underestimate the true magnitude of the problem and are surprised and disturbed when confronted with current statistics.

A Folk Theory of Poverty and Child Poverty

- There is a surprisingly consistent causal model emerging from the research. The public see child poverty as the following:
 - An unfortunate extension of the broader problem of poverty which is much more alarming by virtue of the innocence of children as authors of their poverty.
 - Highly interdependent with other social and economic problems such as crime, health and unemployment. People, therefore, are sceptical of simplistic solutions.
 - Child poverty was seen as the incipient stage of adult poverty; poverty was seen as largely cyclical and intergenerationally transmitted.

Three Generic Explanations of Poverty

- *External economic forces* such as weak regional economies, lack of jobs and globalization were seen as causes of child poverty.
- *Problems with values, life skills and culture.* Somewhat surprisingly, moral explanatory accounts of poverty were more common and powerful perceived causes of poverty: lack of responsibility, effort or family skills were universally cited explanations.
- *Governments* were seen as largely contributing to rather than ameliorating the problem. Either through cuts, inefficient delivery or contradictory macroeconomic policies, most participants saw governments as part of the problem rather than as a solution. Many tend to eschew personal responsibility for poverty, rationalizing the problem as a failure of government (not society).

*Modern Social Morality: The
"Deserving" and "Undeserving" Poor*

- Following from this vernacular theory of poverty there are striking differences in the normative perceptions of poverty. Quite simply there are wide gaps separating the perceptions of deserving and undeserving poor.
- Most secure participants see children as deserving and their parents as less so (possibly unwitting agents of their children's misfortune)
- Welfare recipients are seen in unremittingly negative terms by the economically secure. Vivid stereotypes (bingo, booze, etc.) reveal a range of images of SARs from indolent and feeble to instrumental abusers of the system. Few seem to reconcile these hostile images of SARs as authors of their own misfortune with a parallel consensus that endemic structural unemployment will be a fixed feature of the new economy.
- The economically insecure are decidedly more empathetic but also reveal some of these negative images.
- There has been a broad reappraisal of the notions of poverty and social justice in Canadian society over the past several years. The traditional notions of the social safety net as part of the liberal-capitalist charter have undergone enormous strain. The safety net is now seen, at least in part, as a hammock which has encouraged and perpetuated the very problem it was designed to solve. Perceptions of abuse and inefficiency are pervasive. There are, however, growing class fissures in these perceptions.
- At the same time there is evidence that the hardening of Canadians' compassionate arteries has been noticed by society and that there is growing concern that we are losing some of our core values. As Canadians begin to tire of deficit wars and an increasingly U.S.-dominated moral agenda on social policy, they are looking for a new active response from government in the area of child poverty. They will, however, be wary of partial or old-style responses.
- It is striking to note that this issue is seen as more about values/morality than economics/rationality.

*Solutions — Desirability, Feasibility
and Strategy*

- As noted, child poverty is seen as a national priority although not with the same sense of urgency as other issues. The absence of urgency (it is not linked to imminent crisis, events or day-to-day headlines) does not preclude it becoming a national policy focus according to this research.
- Somewhat surprisingly, in light of entrenched cynicism, most participants believed that it was indeed possible to make significant progress in this area. Overall, there is guarded optimism that we have both the capacity and will to truly improve this problem.
- There are considerable divisions within the public regarding the appropriate strategy. Although there was a virtual consensus that governments had contributed to the problem most participants also believed that government had to be part of a strategy for improvement. This tension between perceptions of poor past performance of governments and an inability to conceive of a government-free future solution is an important feature of the current public opinion landscape. After years of deficit focus and a broad sense of underwhelming federal performance, inefficiency and ethical decline, Canadians are also rejecting the minimal government, thousand points of light, trickle-down economics and tough-love approaches embodied in the neo-conservative wave. Some of this latter movement, particularly the appeal to a moral account of families, community and social pathology has left indelible marks on the Canadian psyche. There is, however, a desire to return to an active social response from government *but* something quite different from the old parental model associated with the welfare-state.
- The search for a new vocabulary and a new strategy to balance "active" sources of hope and optimism (e.g., access, opportunity) with societal responsibility (e.g., compassion, social justice) is a key dilemma. Both the focus group research and recent quantitative research show an emerging consensus that Canadians wish to eschew the "American" neo-conservative approach to social policy while at the same time harbouring serious scepticism about the efficacy and costs of "traditional" social policy responses.
- The groups showed a somewhat grudging consensus that the federal government should be involved. This ranged from a leadership-champion role to a coordinator-partner role but all agreed that significant federal involvement was desirable. There was general agreement that

national standards, a level playing field and societal goal-setting were appropriate areas for federal involvement.

- Few if any would support a federal government go-it-alone approach. Conditioned by high levels of territorial fatigue about inter-jurisdictional bickering, and a conviction that the problem is too complex, big and interdependent to be solved without a coordinated strategy, most endorsed a strong degree of partnership. There was, however, a growing weariness and sense of resignation that such cooperation would not be forthcoming in the present federal-provincial climate.

Reactions to the Specific Proposal

- There were mixed reactions to the proposal to integrate child benefits across federal and provincial jurisdictions. If it was seen as merely integrating existing benefits then people would be unimpressed and critical. Even if the proposal increases resources significantly it does not, on its own, produce universal support.

The key problems are as follows:

- (1) many, particularly the economically secure, do not see inadequate financial resources as the key problem;
 - (2) many believe that services (e.g., education, nutrition, parenting skills) are crucial to solving this problem;
 - (3) many don't believe that the income and service responses can be artificially separated and still be effective;
 - (4) given the highly interdependent nature of the child poverty problem with other social problems many will point to the need for a more comprehensive societal response to these new problems (e.g., poverty, polarization, unemployment, crime, health problem); and
 - (5) entrenched cynicism to government, and scepticism about federal motives (empire-building, electioneering), render the proposal suspect.
- The proposal does receive significant support and embodies certain strengths.
 - It is seen as "something" in an area of high concern.

- It is seen as a legitimate response to levelling some inequities confronting working poor families. There is a strong sense that working poor are more "deserving" poor and that the most insidious expressions of child poverty are seen to occur in the "welfare" family setting.
- It creates some sense that we can make progress with new social problems. It can also be seen as a potential unifying force which reinforces core Canadian social values and provides a sense of progress on a crucial social problem. This sense is reinforced if the proposal is linked to a broader "national project".

Conclusions

- Public concern is strong and this is seen as a legitimate social policy priority for the Federal government.
- The public are highly cynical/mistrustful of the Federal government and this provides a pervasive context and challenge for policy and communications.
- The government should resist the temptation to oversell their proposal; the claims should be modest and positioned as a first (albeit concrete) step in a broader strategy to deal with this problem; the focus here is levelling inequities which working poor families currently experience.
- The problem of child poverty is seen as highly interdependent with a host of other daunting social policy problems (e.g. unemployment, polarization, health, crime). The government should acknowledge the complexity of this causal web and note the need for a coordinated societal response/strategy with a partnership of all key sectors and players working together.
- The notion of a coordinated child poverty strategy as a national project is highly resonant. It provides a focus for developing new thinking and action on the role of citizens, governments and other sectors in sketching a new approach to achieving societal goals. It also connects to core values and provides a potential unifying force and sense of forward progress.
- Although Canadians are receptive to a new active role from the Federal government in defining the kind of society Canada wants to become they are resistant to the old-style approaches and searching for a new balance of active and passive tools which position the Federal government as a strategic partner not directing parents.

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- Canadians prefer to see this proposal presented in the context of values rather than economics. It is not that they see the economic arguments as irrelevant; rather they wish to see economic arguments as subordinate to a higher order "values" rationale.
 - There is continued class polarization underlying debates about the role of the state and the causes and solutions to pressing social problems. The continued hardening of attitudes to welfare and SARs, in spite of recognition of the sheer unavailability of full employment opportunities is a growing issue. In some respects the rationale for the current proposal reinforces the growing moral interpretation of poverty. Despite this concern the research shows the basic logic of income-levelling/support for the working poor and services for the welfare poor is seen as a reasonable division of effort.
 - There are deeper problems and contradictions surrounding the changing role of governments (and other sectors) and citizens in need of a number of major transformations occurring in Canadian society. Clearly Canadians are rejecting both the old-style and neo-conservative approaches (although they wish to appropriate parts of both). There is an urgent policy and communications lacuna in seeking a new vocabulary and framework to begin reconciling these tensions. A broad quantitative survey may help provide a more solid empirical foundation for supporting new policy and communications challenges emerging from this exploratory qualitative research.