

Making poverty a crime is an old tale

RICARDO TRANJAN

In recent weeks the Ontario government passed bills that criminalize homelessness and infringe on Indigenous Peoples' and workers' rights. These actions have sparked justified outrage, but they should not come as a surprise.

Premier Doug Ford's government is rolling out a classic three-act austerity agenda. It starts by cutting social spending, villainizing the poor and public workers to deflect blame, then opening the gates to corporate heroes who will purportedly save the day.

It's an old script. Ronald Reagan was one of the first actors to play the leading role, but many have followed in his footsteps. But there is a way for Ontarians to shape how this story ends.

Act 1: cutting social spending

In 2018, its first year in power, the PC government froze social assistance rates for individuals deemed eligible to work (Ontario Works) at \$733.00 per month. Since then, this already very low amount has lost 18 per cent of its value due to inflation.

In the same year, the government cancelled an approved increase that would have raised minimum wage from \$14 to \$15 an hour on Jan. 1, 2019. Workers waited another three years for that extra dollar.

The PC government also moved fast on rent control, exempting all new units from caps on rent increases.

Since they were elected, the PC government has underfunded schools by \$6.3 billion. Spending on health care is also not keeping up with inflation and population growth. Funding for colleges and universities is falling steadily. The list goes on.

The impacts of these cuts are clear and are seen on the streets and in the lives of everyday Ontarians.

More than 1 million people visited a food bank in Ontario between March 2023 and March 2024. Between 2018 and 2022, the share of families with children experiencing food insecurity jumped from 11.5 per cent to 20 per cent.

The number of long-term care beds per 1,000 inhabitants aged 75 and older fell from 77 in 2018 to 62 in 2023, the lowest level since 1990.

School boards have structural deficits. Colleges are closing programs.

Against this harsh reality, the Ontario government claims to have invested more in public services than ever before. It doesn't add up.

Act 2: villainizing the poor and public workers

Through Bill 6, the Safer Municipalities Act, the government is authorizing police to evict, arrest, and fine homeless people, or all three.

Through Bill 10, the Protect Ontario Through Safer Streets and Stronger Communities Act, government granted landlords the authority to evict tenants based on suspicion of illegal drug activity, rather than evidence.

The Ministry of Education is intervening in school boards with budget deficits, alleging that the problem must be mismanagement.

Premier Ford has depicted social assistance recipients as "healthy young people that are sitting on the couch watching the Flintstones." He has also blamed ER patients with trivial health concerns for long wait times in hospitals.

In the 2025 Ontario budget, homelessness, addictions, and mental health issues are discussed in a chapter titled Cleaning Up Our Streets. Make no mistake, the Ontario government is portraying the poor, the homeless, the ill and strained public workers as villains.

What about the landlords charging rents 44 per cent higher than market averages, the large grocers investigated for price-fixing, and the employers who pocketed \$60 million in wages from workers?

They are the heroes.

In the austerity narrative, magnates save the day as their smart investments make the nation richer, their ever-growing wealth trickles down, benefiting everyone. In this story, corporate interests are depicted as public interest.

Act 3: opening the gates to corporate 'heroes'

Superheroes operate outside the law. Governments look the other way and let them "Clean Up Our Streets."

That's what the omnibus Bill 5, the so-called Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, is about. Nothing and nobody should stand in the way of our heroes, not even Indigenous rights, basic labour standards or environmental concerns.

How does this end?

In a brilliant book ("Send In the Clowns!") that has inspired and informed this analysis, Sean Kennedy and James McNaughton discuss ways to turn around this classic austerity narrative.

First, we must recognize those portrayed as heroes are defending the interests of the small economic elite to which they belong, and resorting to force to do so.

Then, we must build a broad-based solidarity movement centred around dignity: dignity for the poor, the unhoused, the public workers and everyone the austerity agenda beats down.

We're seeing some of this in Ontario, but we need much more of it to change how this story ends.

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AMANI BABY COTTAGE

Hannah Froese sits on the shoulders of Emily Henderson in this 2008 photo from Uganda. Commenting on fatherhood and the voids we live with, Thomas Froese writes about how Emily's identity was recently discovered.

Chance meeting solves a mystery



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

Today, for Father's Day, here's something about a once-upon-a-time photo.

Of course, it's easy to be leery of "once-upon-a-time" stories. We weren't born yesterday, you know.

Even so, once upon a time there was a photo with no dad, but a girl named Hannah, a darling Ugandan girl, two years old, sitting tall and happy on the shoulders of an unknown white woman, a helpful volunteer at the orphanage Hannah called home.

Hannah, at that time, also sometimes looked like the saddest girl in all Africa. Having neither mum nor dad, Hannah lived in that void. Who

wouldn't be sad?

But shortly after that photo, Hannah, who's allowed me to share, met and joined my family. Her striking Ugandan face has since been in many family photos, including in this space.

Hannah kept that old photo over the years, there on her nightstand or a nearby shelf, valued as an important thread, just a thread, to that life before we'd met. And the helpful woman with the good shoulders to sit on? Unknown. Until now.

This past Good Friday, the children's mother had one of those truth-is-stranger-than-fiction experiences. It was in Uganda at Entebbe's airport, a chance encounter, just a conversation with a stranger, a British woman returning to her U.K. home, one Emily Henderson who, as the conversation went, shared about her time years earlier at a Ugandan orphanage.

Canada Post finds its future

A satirical look 74 years from now when the government lets AI settle this standoff

DAVE CAMERON

It's the year 2099, summer is almost here and Canadian postal workers still don't have a new contract.

But there may be hope. After 75 years of unsuccessful negotiations between CUPW and Canada Post, the federal government has decided to intervene and allow artificial intelligence to take over.

The two sides had similar irritated reactions. Why weren't we consulted? Who gets to choose the robots? The corporation is worried its robot representative will be preprogrammed to ignore the need to control operational costs. And the union claims robots are unable to sympathize with the notion of a living wage.

The government seemed to anticipate this pushback and reminded the parties of an early robot axiom: If you have a good robot, one robot is all you need. And so a single machine will be tasked with finding common ground between the parties and making an agreement.

But why did it take 75 years?

The government let the battle go this long because each in a succession of labour ministers declared that humans ought to work things out on their own, as sparring children must sometimes do on the

playground. These ministers persevered with a kind of doe-eyed or even Canadian optimism. That each side would make concessions to allow for compromise. That shared goals would be identified. Again and again the government said, "Working together, they will get this done."

But they couldn't get it done. Decades have passed, during which there has been plenty of drama in the world. Nuclear annihilation was narrowly avoided in 2042, and again in 2070, and during these crises CUPW and Canada Post traded barbs.

People have continued to die on their way to Mars, entire crews vacuumed into deep space or radiated in their chairs, but each mission gets closer, each starship achieves some new metric of success. Perhaps that echoes the tenor of postal negotiations: it's adequate to keep getting closer.

Meanwhile, postal workers continue operating under the last contract from 2023, with annual cost of living bumps (as CUPW leaders like to say, laboratory proteins aren't getting more affordable). Parcel business has remained as consistent as the human love of shopping. And letter mail never petered out entirely as predicted. Some people

This is the story. Emily, first unrecognized, was then discovered as the woman with the good shoulders to sit on. All these years later — Hannah's now in university — this stranger remembered her and the photo. Really? Really. Emily has since sent many more photos, so priceless, of Hannah's early life.

But really? Mister (Miss?) Universe. What's your next trick? What's your next surprise, so mysterious yet revealing, here on this spinning ball in space? What are the odds? What sort of story are we living in?

Now it's Father's Day weekend, time to celebrate the good things many fathers bring to our families. If you're one of those dads, take a bow. Without you, things fall apart. Volumes of research show this, how children and cultures do better when fathers are honoured and involved in family life.

It's why the Hannahs of the world — there are about 140 million orphans worldwide — need, as the expression goes, "love with skin on it." Fatherhood with skin on it, included. Other men who are father figures to kids with other father voids are also helpful here. A brother. An uncle. A family friend. You also should take a bow.

Brokenness and dad voids will still be out there. It's why some struggle with images of the ultimate dad, God.

My own view is that if humanity's "Abba," the Aramaic word for "Daddy," or "Papa," is love, then it's helpful to imagine any one of us like some kid jumping into his lap to talk about our day, or show him our hurts, or just enjoy the moment.

But consider this. About the time of that photo, "The Shack," a novel by William Paul Young, was published. It characterizes God the Father, or "Papa," as a Black woman. Some 25 million books sold. (Young's more recent "Lies we believe about God" is now on my own nightstand.)

So what if "Papa" has the skin of a Black woman? No, really. Is offence taken? What if that dad is like an animal? Like a lion, or lamb or mother bear? What if "he" is like an inanimate object, like a rock or fortress? Maybe, then, even incomplete images are helpful. It's food for thought.

Because this is how much of life — your story and mine — is lived, with incomplete pictures in discomfiting voids. It's OK. This is why Hannah always valued her once-upon-a-time photo. She was at peace with what she had. Until, in the fullness of time, she was given more.

I, for one, as Hannah's dad, think there's something remarkable in this.

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like paper: even if it's a credit downgrade or an eviction notice, it's something real in one's hand.

Over the years, the talks between CUPW and Canada Post became known only for their antagonistic nature. Entire negotiation teams were replaced by their children, and then a third generation came in, and each time all the old stances and demands were maintained. Sometimes the two sides don't talk at all, but at least once a year this is by mutual agreement. Back in the 2050s, it became a tradition to pause negotiations for the summer. Because summer.

That's the kind of impulse the federal government finally became fatigued by.

A spokesperson said that sometimes the only way to solve a human problem is to remove humans from the problem-solving.

This just in

The robot assigned to resolve the 75-year-old Canada Post contract dispute produced a balanced and forward-looking 500-page collective agreement in half a minute. As they slowly read and reread the document, the humans on each side of the table are said to have expressed a displeasure that became grudging acceptance. And, for the moment, it seems a Canadian institution will last into the 22nd century.

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