

Inquest indicts Ontario Tories in welfare death

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A coroner's inquest has found that the Ontario Tory government's vindictive and Victorian welfare policies contributed to the death of a 40-year-old woman, Kimberly Rogers. The Tories, however, are unmoved.

Community and Children Services Minister Brenda Elliott has curtly dismissed the inquest's call for a significant increase in welfare rates and an end to the "devastating and detrimental" practice of banning persons convicted of welfare fraud from ever again drawing benefits. "We think the welfare reforms are working," declared Elliott only hours after the five-person jury had delivered its findings. "We are not contemplating changes to the policy of zero tolerance."

In August 2001, Rogers was found dead in her tiny Sudbury apartment. Eight-months pregnant, she was in the middle of six-months of house arrest, part of her punishment for having drawn welfare while also taking out government-supported student loans.

Initially it was thought Rogers had died of heat stroke—her death came in the midst of a heat-wave. However, the inquest found she had died of a lethal dose of antidepressants.

When it was first learned that Rogers had taken her own life, the *National Post* could scarcely contain its glee. "The state did not kill Kimberly Rogers," it crowed. The *Globe and Mail's* Margaret Wentle likewise castigated critics of the Ontario Tory government's welfare policies for making Rogers into a "martyr."

In the face of this callous attempt to blame the victim and justify the Tories' assault on the poor, it is all the more significant that the inquest so emphatically found fault with the government. In effect, the inquest concluded the Tories' welfare policies had helped drive Rogers to suicide.

Many of the inquest's 14 recommendations directly

challenge the Tories' welfare reform, which has been touted by the Tories and their big business supporters as one of the principal achievements of the Common Sense Revolution. Almost immediately on taking office in June 1995, the Tories cut welfare benefits by 21.6 percent. And they have not been increased even once in the intervening seven years, meaning inflation has eroded their real value by a further 15 percent.

In addition to slashing benefits, the Tories have implemented and greatly expanded the "workfare" schemes initiated under the previous New Democratic Party government. In the name of ending welfare dependency, welfare recipients are forced into participating in training schemes under the threat of losing their benefits. These schemes are not designed to equip people with the skills need to find good and rewarding work, but rather to find them "the shortest route to employment"—that is to low-paying, dead-end jobs.

Kimberly Rogers' plight was in part born of her attempt to escape from this trap. In April 2001, shortly after graduating from Cambrian College with an honor's degree in social work, she pleaded guilty to fraud. According to the government, she had received an overpayment of \$13,486 for drawing \$520 a month in welfare over a three-year period during which she also took out \$32,000 in student loans. As punishment, Rogers was sentenced to six months of house arrest and 18 months probation, had her welfare benefits suspended for three months and was ordered to repay the overpayment.

Arguing that she was pregnant, Rogers succeeded in having the suspension of her benefits waived, pending an appeal of her sentence. But this brought little comfort, since after her rent and money toward repaying the government were subtracted, she had just

\$18 a month left for food and all other necessities. Moreover, under the terms of her house arrest, she was only allowed to leave her apartment for medical treatment and religious events and her total weekly time away from home was limited to just three hours.

Not only was the province caught in a heat wave at the time of Kimberly's suicide, she had a history of medical problems, including migraines, insomnia and chronic pain resulting from knee surgery in 1997. In the final term of her pregnancy, in deep anguish over her future and her ability to care for her child, she took an overdose of prescribed medication she had accumulated in anticipation of losing her welfare entitlement to drug coverage.

The same month that Rogers was sentenced, the Ontario Tories introduced a still harsher policy. Under the new regulations anyone found guilty of welfare fraud, irrespective of the amount or circumstances, is subject to a lifetime ban from receiving last resort benefits. Such bans are normally reserved only for the most heinous crimes, but the Tories, who have lined the pockets of the rich and super-rich with tax cuts, are determined to scapegoat the poor.

The 14 recommendations of the coroner's inquest into Rogers' death are addressed to the requisite provincial ministries, including six to the Ministry of Community and Children's Services which administers welfare. Specifically, the Community Services Ministry has been called upon to eliminate the lifetime ban for those convicted of fraud, and even automatic temporary suspensions, since both are likely to cause an increase in homelessness, hunger and death. The inquest also recommended that the ministry try to detect fraud earlier so prosecutions can be avoided, that drug benefits to persons with serious medical problems not be discontinued even if their benefits are suspended, and that welfare benefits be increased to take better account of minimum needs.

Traditionally governments take the recommendations of corner's inquests very seriously, with more than 70 percent of them resulting in changes in law or government policy. Yet, in the case of the inquest into Ms. Rogers' death, the Tories, adding insult to injury, moved to bury the recommendations on delivery.

Whilst cruel and shocking, the case of Kimberly Rogers is unfortunately far from unique. Earlier this year, a government inquiry found that the Tories' cuts

to the Environment Ministry and rush to privatize and deregulate the province's water-testing system had contributed to the Walkerton water-poisoning tragedy. And each winter brings a growing number of deaths of homeless people.



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