

Canada: NDP leader defends Manitoba government's childcare record

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Federal New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair has defended the Manitoba NDP government's deplorable record of failing to protect and adequately provide for "at risk" children taken into government care.

The vast majority of these children are native infants and youth.

Large numbers of Manitoba's "at risk" youth are housed in "welfare hotels"—that is, flop houses—with inadequate supervision, allowing them to be preyed upon, victimized and even, as in the recent case of 15-year-old Tina Fontaine, murdered.

The children, who frequently come from homes blighted by violence and substance abuse, are largely left to their own devices, with their supervision consigned to poorly-trained, low-paid workers.

In an attempt to deflect blame from the provincial NDP to the current Conservative federal government and previous federal Liberal governments, Mulcair said earlier this month: "On the specific issue of children in care, it's a scandal across the country, not in one province, and it is not the fault of one political party, it is the fault of a failure on the part of the federal government to deal with this properly. The federal government has primary responsibility in this area, has to make sure the resources are there because the delivery of those services is often the result of an agreement with the provinces and it is a situation that I find as intolerable as the (native) residential school situation for which we correctly apologized."

Manitoba has been governed by the so-called "worker-friendly" NDP for the past 16 years. Yet the federal and provincial NDP refuses to take any political responsibility for the horrendous plight of Manitoba's "at-risk" children. It is of course true that successive federal governments have left native people living on

reserves without proper housing and other basic social infrastructure, underfunded native education, and otherwise reduced social spending and transfers to the provinces.

But in claiming that inadequate federal funding is solely to blame, Mulcair ignores the Manitoba NDP government's \$1 billion per-year corporate tax cuts, its generous cuts in the personal income taxes of the rich, as well as the provincial government's constitutional responsibility to provide child and family services.

In April, NDP Minister of Family Services Kerri Irvin-Ross, who oversees the Manitoba Child and Family Services department, pledged that the use of "welfare motels" would be halted by June 1, 2015. This came in the wake of the severe beating of a 15-year-old girl in CFS care. Like similar promises made by previous NDP CFS ministers, Irvin-Ross' has not been kept.

In his defence of the Manitoba NDP, Mulcair went on to declare that an NDP federal government would work to improve the situation confronted by "at risk" children. He vowed, "we will work hard with the provinces and territories to make sure that the expertise and the funds flow so that we can avoid another tragedy in the future."

In truth, the scandal surrounding the housing of vulnerable children in low-rent motels showcases the contempt with which the social democratic NDP government treats the province's First Nations (i.e., native) and working class population.

Successive Manitoba NDP governments under former premier Gary Doer and his successor Greg Selinger have been praised by the mainstream press and conservative think tanks for pursuing austerity policies indistinguishable from those of the big business Liberals. Doer, who engineered three majority election

victories, openly proclaimed himself a “small l” liberal. His government’s cozy relationship with the “megabarn” hog factories and meat-packing companies in the province was so egregious that it was criticized even within NDP circles.

During his tenure, Doer provided more than a billion dollars in tax cuts that were heavily weighted to favour the wealthiest sections of the population, weakened environmental regulations, and oversaw an alarming increase in poverty. After Doer left provincial politics, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper appointed him to the high profile post of Canada’s ambassador to the United States.

Selinger subsequently reduced corporate taxes in the province from 14 to 12 percent, making them for a time the lowest in the country. The province has one of the highest rates of child and family poverty in Canada, some of the lowest average weekly earnings, and an extreme crisis in affordable housing.

Along with British Columbia, Manitoba has Canada’s highest poverty rate, with almost 12 percent of Manitoba’s population, and a substantially greater proportion of its children, living in dire straits.

Relative to the rest of the country, Manitoba has the most children in foster care. There are over 10,000 children in care in Manitoba, a number that has increased by 400 children in the past year alone and about 90 percent of them are First Nations children.

Reports prepared for a recent Winnipeg Police Board meeting say that officers deal with an average of 550 missing persons reports each month, of which 83 percent involve children in care living in CFS facilities.

Manitoba also has one of the highest child-apprehension rates in Canada. First Nations child and family advocate Cora Morgan said social workers are seizing an average of one newborn baby a day. According to Morgan, “The taps of apprehension are on high and the bathtub was full five years ago, so they have kids spilling out all over the place. They’re prepared to shove them anywhere. In this system, you are guilty until you can prove you are innocent. They’re not going in and investigating to see if there is another side of the story. They’re not going in there to say, ‘How can we help you?’... They just take the kids.”

In most cases, CFS removes children from their parents not because of outright abuse, but because of

“neglect”—a condition which, as the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in June, would be “more accurately described as poverty.” This “often includes a lack of permanent housing or having to leave a child alone to go to work. Poor parents who reach out to child services for social assistance, often instead see their children simply taken from them.”

For First Nations families, the situation is further aggravated by the horrendous legacy of state genocide in the residential school system, which forcibly tore children from their familial homes and inflicted terrible physical and emotional abuse on generation after generation. (See: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Report and the crimes against the native people)

The NDP Manitoba provincial government recently became the first in Canada to apologize for systematically apprehending native children starting in the 1960s, a practice known as the “60s Scoop,” and placing them with non-Native families. As the current care crisis shows, this apology is just window dressing.

Mulcair, who is happy to offload responsibility for the horrendous situation in Manitoba, has stumped in the current federal election squarely in the tradition of Doer, Selinger and other former NDP provincial premiers. Since ascending to the leadership of the party, he has proclaimed himself the “champion” of Canadian business interests, vowed not to increase the taxes of even the wealthiest Canadians, and pledged to eschew deficit-spending. He has also gone to great lengths to remind the Canadian ruling class of the sweeping social spending cuts made by the Saskatchewan NDP government of Roy Romanow in the 1990s, the corporate and personal income tax cuts made by the subsequent provincial NDP administration of Lorne Calvert, and the anti-working class record of successive NDP governments in Manitoba.

This author also recommends:

Canada’s aboriginal Truth and Reconciliation Report—the class issues
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