

1 April 2008

Dear New Zealand Herald Editor,

I was appalled by Monday's Editorial which said churches could solve most of New Zealand's social problems by better enforcing the personal ethics of individuals.

The levels of poverty we are experiencing are *not* due to a sudden lapse in the personal morals of New Zealanders – recent university research has shown that we believe strongly in taking responsibility for ourselves but also value the kind of community spirit that sees thousands of volunteers helping the needy without expecting anything in return.

But volunteers cannot change the broader social and economic context which creates poverty – as the Labour government recognised by supplementing incomes through Working for Families. What the churches object to is that Labour helped 'middle New Zealand' while ignoring those on benefits, even though net benefit rates continue to drop rapidly compared to net average wages. Why care about benefit levels? Because we know that poverty is detrimental to the health and education of the children of beneficiaries, who are our future workers. The churches' call for an increase in benefit rates thus aims to help *all* New Zealanders by ensuring healthy, educated workers for the future economy and is not simply a nostalgic look back to the past.

Dr Louise Humpage  
Department of Sociology  
University of Auckland

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Dear Editor,

The Herald editorial which suggests that egalitarian societies are only communist is both foolish and wrong.

Scandinavian countries have low societal inequality, and are high growth economies with extremely low levels of child poverty. Policy direction in New Zealand since the 1980's has resulted in our income inequality growing the fastest in the OECD. We now have income inequality greater than the UK , Canada or Australia .

This income inequality has impacted particularly harshly on children, with New Zealand also scoring badly in international comparisons of children's wellbeing. Public concern from any quarter about poverty levels in this rich country is to be applauded and the combined church statement has drawn attention to the sad truth about child poverty in New Zealand. While child poverty has improved in recent years it still stands at an unacceptably high 20%.

Income inequality and poverty are not inevitable. Every child can and should have a rich life.

Janfrie Wakim  
Child Poverty Action Group  
Director

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It is disturbing to hear of families, both on benefits and low wages, being forced into increasingly sub-standard housing in this country, and not just in Auckland. For the parents it is of huge concern and for the children perhaps damning them for life.

But, for all of these families there is a landlord and I wonder what drives them? And I wonder if it is indeed the same set of drivers that lead people to become employers of cleaners at our hospitals, like Spotless and others with workers surviving on the minimum wage.

If you're a landlord of sub-standard, over-crowded housing or employ people on the minimum wage, WHY?

Graham Howell  
Wellington