

Election taught painful lessons to anti-poverty groups

They aren't ready to hear this, but the anti-poverty advocates who lobby tirelessly on behalf of low-income Canadians, need to ask why so many of them voted for Stephen Harper.

They won't like the answers they get. They won't understand how food bank users and social housing tenants could believe the Conservative Prime Minister is on their side. They'll be tempted to interrupt, object or argue that voters were manipulated, rather than listening.

That would be counterproductive. There is an obvious gap in their knowledge. Left unaddressed, it will undermine them in next fall's provincial election campaign, the same way it did in last week and seven months ago when Rob Ford won Toronto's mayoral race.

It would be easy to explain away Harper's victory. The Conservatives benefited from the orange wave that spilled into Ontario from Quebec, splitting the left-wing vote between the New Democrats and Liberals. That allowed Harper to pick up 22 seats in the province, 18 of them in the Toronto Area. He had the active support of Toronto's mayor and his team. He used smear tactics and scaremongering to undermine his opponents.

Likewise it would be easy to keep speaking to the converted, hoping the government will get the message. Although Harper has announced his priorities — which don't include poverty reduction — anti-poverty groups are already writing and circulating articles that bolster their case.

But neither rationalization nor willful blindness will do them much good as they prepare for the next electoral showdown. Tim Hudak, who leads the ascendant Ontario Conservatives, takes his tactics from the same playbook as Harper and Ford.

After being sidelined by right-wing leaders federally and municipally, anti-poverty campaigners need to figure out why these politicians are connecting with voters — especially low-income voters — and how to counteract their tactics.

My soundings are limited and anecdotal, but a few themes keep popping up:

People in high-crime neighbourhoods (which are nearly always poor) are the biggest victims of the drug dealers and violent young offenders Harper is promising to lock up. They want relief from the fear and violence they can't escape. They want to rid their communities of the gangs that lure their children into gun-and-gang culture. Cracking down on crime makes sense to them.

What low-income voters want most are jobs; not government programs, not abstract poverty-reduction plans, certainly not hand-outs. Harper tapped into that yearning, promising to stabilize the economy and create employment.

People struggling to make ends resent seeing secure middle-class bureaucrats get pay increases. Those scraping by with two or three low-wage, precarious jobs take offence when public employees earning far more than they ever will are rewarded for what they regard as easy work. Those receiving public assistance — employment insurance, welfare, old age security — dislike being treated with contempt by imperious government officials. Cutting the public payroll appeals to them.

Canadians fighting to stay afloat often have little regard for the anti-poverty organizers, professors and social planners who purport to represent them. They don't like their presumption and don't share their political philosophy.

Like the rest of the populace, low-income voters mistrust all politicians. They don't believe their promises and they don't pay much attention to their rhetoric. Many don't cast ballots. Those who do tend to back politicians who speak in plain language about issue that matters to them.

Some of these signals are contradictory. Some are counter-intuitive. But they suggest the anti-poverty movement is out-of-step with its assumed followers. And they challenge its leaders to take a painfully honest look at themselves and their vision.

These are hard lessons. They will require openness and humility.

But the alternative is increasing irrelevance.

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