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*Nick Speaks on Others Taking the Opportunity to
Experience Living on a Food Bank Diet*

In the Liberals' recent budget, the poorest in Ontario got exactly what they've come to expect from politicians. They weren't just ignored, they were attacked. This time it was through the eradication of the Special Diet Allowance, a lifeline to food for thousands of people living on social assistance in this province. Hiding behind an auditor general's report that highlighted fraud in the system, the Liberals nimbly sidestepped the real fraud perpetrated each and every month: unethical and staggeringly low social assistance rates, which rob the most vulnerable people in our society of their health and dignity.

No one wants to be poor. No one wants to battle cockroaches in a damp basement apartment or send their kids to school hungry. This may sound self-evident, but it's worth reminding ourselves of this lest we go back to darker political times when poverty was seen as a character flaw or a lifestyle choice.

It's mantras like this, of course, that Mike Harris and his government dined out on during their tenure. They demonized the poor, stripping away our hard-won social safety net, cutting, among other things, social assistance rates by 22 per cent.

The McGuinty Liberals said they'd take a different tack on the poverty file. They told us they understood that poverty is more often than not connected to a disability, lack of affordable housing or a pension that doesn't cover the bills. The language was good. Many of us working with the most vulnerable in our province felt hopeful that change was coming.

But the recent budget is a stark reminder that you can't eat nice words. Yes, they have moved on increasing the minimum wage. But when it comes to people on social assistance this government has, in real terms, done nothing to reverse the Harris cuts. The new budget raises Ontario Works rates a meagre 1 per cent (a monthly increase that's less than a round trip on the subway) while inflation is projected to rise to 2 per cent this year. And the elimination of the Special Diet Allowance, an additional amount allotted to those whose poor health demands healthy food, is actually a step backwards for thousands of people.

We've all heard the repeated calls for "realism" and "restraint" when it comes to spending, but for the poor and marginalized in this province, reality is restraint. Reality means making choices between rent and food, medication and diapers, a transit pass or textbook. Under the new budget, a single person on Ontario Works will receive \$595 a month; the average bachelor apartment in Toronto rents for \$800. Do the math: such low rates mean it's

impossible to afford both shelter and healthy food. Ever-increasing numbers of people are forced to rely on food banks, an inadequate emergency response that is now entrenched and institutionalized.

And it's not just those on social assistance who are affected. Poverty affects us all through lost productivity, unsafe neighbourhoods, ballooning health-care costs, unrealized potential and a shortage of skilled workers. With this latest attack on the poor, the Liberals are stealing from our future.

We need to show this government that we won't accept such short-sighted "realism." We need to remind them that tackling poverty requires leadership, training and supportive social policy that can help people move on with their lives. It's why The Stop and thousands of others want this government to immediately introduce a \$100 healthy food supplement for all adults on social assistance. We ask also that it establish a rate-setting process based on what it actually costs to live in our province – not on some arbitrary number the government feels it can afford at a particular moment. Being realistic should not mean battling a deficit at the expense of the province's most vulnerable.

This week, a group of well-known Ontarians will show this government that they aren't willing to accept its retreat from its own poverty reduction agenda. Toronto's Medical Officer of Health Dr. David McKeown, activist and author Naomi Klein and former head of Alliance Atlantis Michael MacMillan, among others, plan to experience for just a few days the reality of living on the budget available to someone on social assistance. This means eating only from a food bank hamper and at soup kitchens. This act of solidarity aims to draw attention to the gross inadequacies of social assistance rates and underline the urgent need for this government to take action.

It's not too late for the McGuinty Liberals to fulfill their own promises. In fact, we need their leadership now more than ever. Rhetoric about equity and fairness must be replaced by action. Doing nothing just isn't an option anymore.