

# Politics and Poverty: different worlds

By Chris Axworthy

If you were to imagine a hypothetical conversation going on between a couple of delegates at the Tory convention in August, it might go something like this: "There are so many good restaurants in this city, but I'm trying to go out only once a week to eat - it's getting so expensive for me."

"Yeah, everybody's feeling the pinch. I have a friend who's a stockbroker in Toronto, and she said the market is shaky - the commissions aren't coming in as quickly as they usually do. She likes to go down south every year to get away from it all, but this year she can only afford a Canadian holiday."

Not an uncommon conversation, it's one that could be heard between many people across the country. But there was one place during the weekend of the convention where I am quite sure it wouldn't be heard, and that was at Mulroneyville.

Mulroneyville was a brand new small town right in the heart of Toronto. The people who lived there for one week are not stockbrokers, business people, lawyers, or doctors. In fact, many of them have no occupation at all, and you can bet that they know what it means to "feel the pinch". For many residents of Mulroneyville, and many other towns and cities across Canada, feeling the pinch does not mean forgoing buying a new vehicle for their children. It does not mean that they give up an expensive holiday for an affordable

one. In fact, a holiday for many of them means a trip to the laundromat without their children.

What they forego during a recession, and sometimes during good times, is food for themselves so they can feed their children. They forego heat in the

could not be greater. Delegates to the convention were renewing acquaintances with friends, meeting new acquaintances, and saying, "let me buy you lunch" quite often.

The residents of Mulroneyville can't buy their friends lunch very often, nor

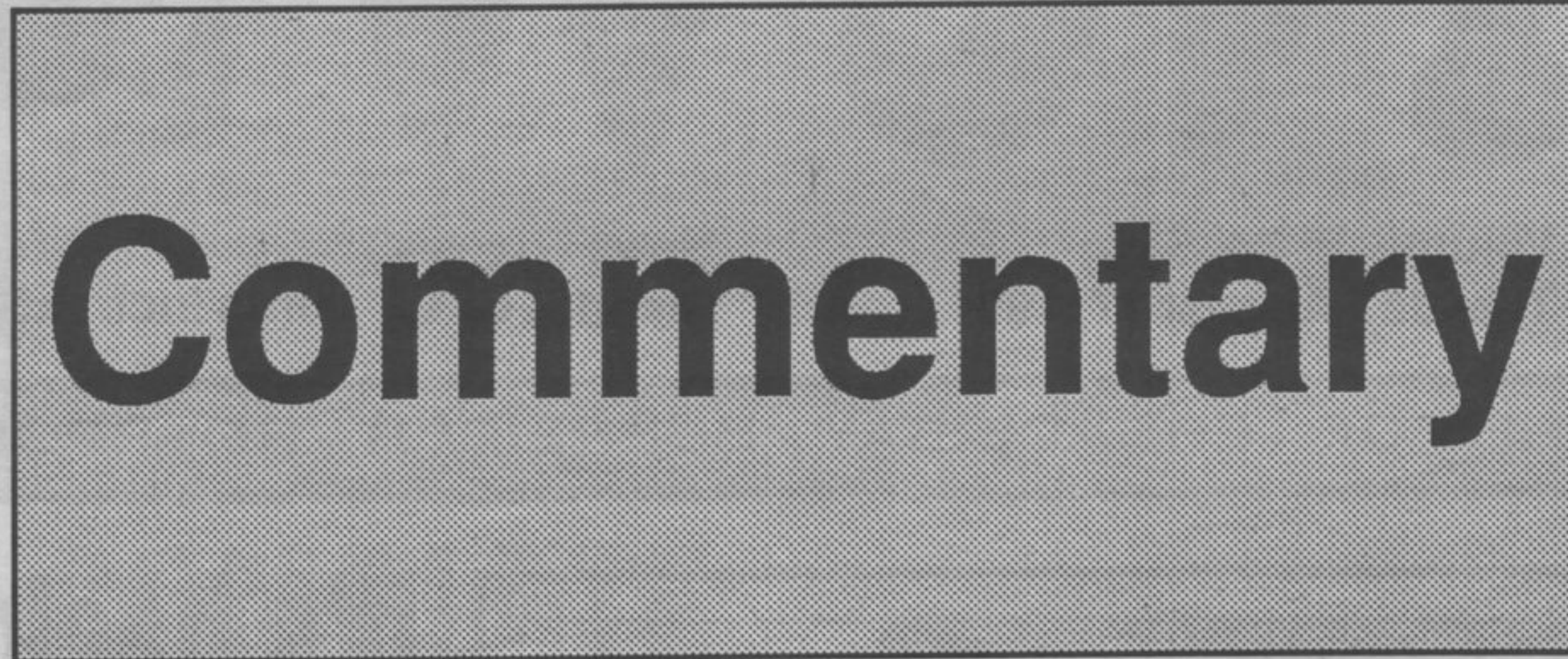
there is about \$6 a day available for food, personal care items, clothing, and miscellaneous household needs. Agriculture Canada suggests that a nutritious diet costs about \$5 per person per day.

Michael Wilson said that he knows what it's like to live in hard times because he was once forced to take a pay cut on Bay Street. I guess that means that he wasn't able to buy a new Giorgio Armani suit that year.

Delegates and politicians at the convention dismissed the folks at Mulroneyville as a fringe group, and a crazy one at that. It's true, Mulroneyville only had 24 residents, but they represent a whole nation which is frustrated with the leadership of the country. They represent the 1.5 million unemployed Canadians; the thousands of food bank users across the country; the single mothers who desperately need accessible child care; the social assistance recipients who are trying to escape the poverty cycle but who find a new obstacle at every turn; the one million Canadian children who live in poverty.

Gordon Lightfoot sings a song about the "sunny side of life". I wonder if Brian Mulroney and his ideological sisters and brothers know that there are clouds looming on the horizon.

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winter because they can't afford to pay the utility bills. They forego buying new clothes for their children when school starts. They forego job searches because it is impossible for them to find care for their children which is both affordable and safe. Their children forego educational school trips because they can't afford the bus fare or the admission to go to the event. They forego their dignity while they line up at soup kitchens and food banks.

For these people, the pinch is a little sharper, a little deeper, and a lot more painful.

The contrast between the convention that went on at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre and the tent city which was set up right across the road from it

can they often afford to buy lunch out for themselves. If they do, it might mean a walk home instead of a bus ride, or a trip to the food bank instead of having the money to buy their own groceries.

Many convention delegates paid between \$100 and \$200 a night to stay in a downtown hotel during the convention. If residents of Mulroneyville spent this kind of money on a hotel room, they would have to spend the rest of the month on the street.

The Royal York offers a Sunday brunch which costs \$19.50 (plus tax and gratuities) for adults and \$14.50 for children. For residents of Mulroneyville who have no source of income other than social assistance,

# Mt McKay Accord - A new beginning

"I come to you today as the leader of the Government of Ontario seeking a new relationship, a new understanding - one that is based on respect." - Premier Bob Rae

"We've been waiting a long time for the settler governments to mature to the point where we can treat them like equals." - Chief Gary Potts, Chief, Teme-Augama Anishnabai (Bear Island Indian Band).

Both these quotes are taken from speeches made on the top of Mt. McKay, overlooking Thunder Bay, on August 6th. The ceremony commemorated the signing of a "Statement of Political Relationship" between the Ontario government and 15 First Nation leaders, representing all aboriginal people in Ontario - at least those living on reserves.

The ceremony was taken with great seriousness, especially by the aboriginal representatives. Traditional elder Roger Jones led the assembled audience of over 250 people in a traditional ceremony of sweet grass burning, tobacco gifts, and drinking water from a copper dish. After all the speeches, Jones used a large eagle feather to fan smoke from a sacred fire over the signatures on the document.

I stood behind the bleachers with other reporters at this event, and found myself being consulted about what it really meant. "Is this a treaty?" one television reporter asked. "No," I insisted. "Ottawa is not represented here." Nonetheless, Ottawa was watch-

ing closely.

With the Blue Jays struggling to hold on to first place these days, a baseball analogy seems appropriate. In effect, aboriginal people and the government of Ontario have now reached first base. There's still a long way to go before we reach home plate.

Nonetheless, reaching first is important. When I put my baseball analogy to Bud Wildman, the Minister of Native Affairs, he said "Sometimes getting on first base is the hardest part of the ball game, isn't it? Once you've made it on base, then you have a chance to get home."

Getting to home plate, which in this case means signing full self-government agreements with all First Nations in the province, according to Wildman, may take many years. He told me it may take longer than just the first term of office of this NDP administration to sign agreements everywhere in Ontario, as promised by Bob Rae in his inaugural address as Premier on October 1, 1990.

Wildman said, "I don't put deadlines on this process. We're talking about relationships that have developed over hundreds of years. I would hope that we will have one or two self-government agreements signed by the end of our first mandate as a government in Ontario, and that's what we're working towards. But it's a two-sided process.

We can't set the agenda on our own. It's an agenda which is determined both by the government of Ontario and by the First Nations and by the Treaty organizations. I think that having this "first base", as you point out, is a commitment that will enable us to move more quickly and make progress in the other areas as well."

What's important about this agreement was expressed best by Ovide Mercredi, the head of the Assembly of First Nations. In an interview on *News-*

*world* the same day the agreement was signed, Merce-

di said, "The federal government has a policy that forces our people into accepting delegated authority of self-government as pronounced from time to time by Parliament. What Bob Rae has done through the political arrangement that he signed with the First Nations in Ontario has shown that there is another way of dealing with the powers of self-government without requiring our people, the First Nations, to feel inferior by accepting *delegated authority* by another level of government."

In other words, the "settler governments", as they were described in the signing ceremony, can no longer pick and choose what powers are going to be delegated to First Nations. The accord signed on top of Mt. McKay is a statement of recognition - one government to another. Wildman and Rae have set

no limits or preconceived models of what "self-government" means.

For some First Nations, it may mean a simple kind of municipal administration, like the one accepted by the Seashelt First Nation in British Columbia. For other First Nations, it could mean a kind of partnership arrangement, involving all levels of "settler governments" and the First Nation managing resources, and making day to day administrative decisions. For still others, it could mean complete autonomy over a certain piece of territory - involving even more control than a provincial government has - but stopping short of sovereign nation status, with embassies and currency and a military and all the other trappings of "nationhood".

Even one of the most militant aboriginal leaders at the signing ceremony made that clear. Mike Mitchell, Grand Chief of the Mohawks of Akwesasne said, "When the white man and the Indians first signed a treaty in North America, the white men said 'My Kin will be your father.' But the native people said, 'No. We cannot make a treaty or an agreement like that. For a father can tell his son what to do. We will be brothers. We will co-exist. And in that way there will be honour, respect and integrity in our relationship.' That's how our country really began. These two people beside me (Rae and Wildman) wish to put integrity back in our relationship."

continued on page 10



**NORTHERN INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders

