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Editorial

Another modest proposal

You can't help admiring a government that not only recognizes the generosity of the electorate but has the prudence to exploit it. In Ontario, the political satisfaction of the people has been a bargain at \$200 per taxpaying head, and no one has complained that this sum is barely sufficient to defray the expense and inconvenience of gathering evidence against fellow citizens for the Welfare Fraud Hotline (1 800 394-7867, if you have information). True, this \$1 billion in tax rebates might have been squandered on hospitals or schools, but sorting out requirements for bed spaces and "bums in seats" (the latest school-planning parlance) is such a tedious affair that we might as well concentrate on issues everyone can agree about. Such as the pressing need to stamp out the poor. To stamp out *poverty*, we mean.

People are dropping off the Ontario welfare rolls like flies, at a rate of 12 per hour.¹ Whether this reflects the success of job creation programs, a knock-on effect of the US economy, or the increasing heartlessness of the system is, as moral doubts go, trifling. The justice of any reform may be measured by its efficacy: the drop in welfare payments is truly staggering,² and we need not be fooled by rising rates of homelessness or the affordability crisis in tenant housing.³ Fortunately, the government is sensitive to the embarrassment of 450 000 people in the province still clinging to their welfare cheques and has proposed mandatory drug testing and treatment as a means of weakening their grip. Only the morally feeble will be distracted by arguments that at least 70% of people with a drug dependence are in fact not on welfare, but employed, that drug testing is a spotty way to get at addiction problems, or that mandatory treatment will founder on the clinical fact of relapse rates.⁴ Only

those with a gift for illogic would question the extension of the drug testing program to people on disability assistance whose only disability is drug addiction. No matter what the Human Rights Commissioner says, we cannot deprive anyone of the chance to be, as the Minister of Community and Social Services puts it, saved.

In a progressive society it is not enough to promote health and prosperity. These values must be enforced. Diagnosis and treatment are serious matters that should not be left to the medical profession, with its qualms about patient autonomy, privacy, dignity and consent. The poor must accept that they are in no position to quibble about rights.

But why has no one realized that a solution first proposed in 1729 would further relieve the welfare burden in Ontario? We must persuade the poor to redress their debt to society by selling their children as food. We anticipate some queasiness among the faint of heart, but surely no other expedient will be as effective, least of all that "Of being a little cautious not to sell our ... consciences for nothing."⁵ — *CMAJ*

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