

### Children...Our Most Precious Resource

By Marvin M. Bernstein

*Following is the viewpoint of the writer, the Saskatchewan Children's Advocate.*

On November 20, which is National Child Day and the anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, it is important to reflect on two outstanding concerns: child poverty and the plight of Aboriginal children. All of us have a responsibility to work towards improving these unfortunate circumstances. Everyday, many of the children and youth of our province are denied the universal rights contained in this fundamental document.

In 1989, the House of Commons unanimously resolved to eliminate child poverty in Canada. Nonetheless 19 years later, there are still too many children living in poverty across the country. At 11.7 per cent, the national child poverty rate is exactly the same as it was in 1989. In Saskatchewan, 12.9 per cent of our children live below the poverty line. Of all Canadian provinces, only British Columbia and Manitoba have higher levels of child poverty. The situation is even more serious for Aboriginal children, where the national poverty rate stands at approximately 40 per cent, with the Saskatchewan poverty rate hovering at approximately 50 per cent. In other words, Aboriginal children in Saskatchewan experience a ratio of poverty almost four times greater than the general child and youth population.

On February 14, 2008, I had the distinct honour of addressing the Chiefs of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations' Legislative Assembly, where I called upon the provincial government to take four action steps in response to the two tragic sibling deaths at Yellow Quill First Nations. I would renew that call to action some nine months later.

On a national scale, on June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper read an historic apology from the Government of Canada to residential school survivors that said in part, "To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this."

As this tragic period of Canadian history is finally being acknowledged and addressed by our federal leaders, there are many lessons to be learned from these past events and experiences that could inform current attitudes, policies, practices and legislation that marginalize or harm children and youth in Saskatchewan. Among the approximate 4,500 children in the care of the Saskatchewan Government or First Nations child and family service agencies, there is a significant over-representation of Aboriginal children. While 15 per cent of the total Saskatchewan population is Aboriginal, a staggering 80 per cent of children coming into care are of Aboriginal background, with approximately 75 per cent of these children being of First Nations descent. This is one of the highest rates in the country and compares unfavourably with the national average of Aboriginal children in care, which has been estimated at a still disproportionate 38 per cent.

The root causes of why and how so many Aboriginal children are in care are complex and require application of historical and contemporary contexts. However, to even begin that analysis, we must first acknowledge that this and other children's issues exist; that social injustice is not a thing of the past; and that every day certain rights of children are breached in our province.

Today, I call on the province of Saskatchewan to embrace and promote a comprehensive and child-centred "children's agenda" that would respect the rights of children in the same light as those afforded groups such as women, First Nations peoples and the disabled, all of whom have demanded that they be treated with respect and dignity, and that their voices be heard. We need to move away from the idea that children are property or objects of protection, and begin to view them as rights-holders and full members of our society.

As we enjoy a new prosperity in our province, built upon the abundance of "economic resources," it would benefit all of us to consider one very special and precious "human resource" that could sustain this success into future generations: the children and youth of Saskatchewan. Now is the time to invest in them. Saskatchewan will be a much better place for all of us if we do.