

HOW IT CAME TO BE

by Floyd DeBarber

It all started, or perhaps I should say ended, in the fall of 1995. The Harris Tories took power. The day Harris was sworn in, a bunch of activist groups got together and hosted a huge rally-turned-riot on the front lawn and front steps of the Ontario Legislature. The anger, fear, desperation, and frustration shown that day meant nothing to Harris. His comment was, "we don't do rallies".

The first attack of the war on the poor was done before Harris was even sworn in. This was the massive cut to welfare payments. OCAP went as far as taking a huge delegation to the Ontario version of the Governor General's home to ask that he refuse to sign this bill. It didn't work. This unfortunately was only part of the beginning attack. Along with the cut the Tories also cancelled the Family Benefits Program. This meant that just about everybody on Ontario social services was put on the new Ontario Works program. This meant that a huge number of people who had been getting not quite enough to support themselves or their families would now have to go with even less. This included many people's homes, many children's meals, and most of all, people's basic dignity and sanity.

Those with disabilities were allowed to apply for the new version of Family Benefits, the Ontario Disability Support Program. This meant that a program that had begun in the early 1900's, a program that no politician would dare touch was completely disappearing: Mother's Allowance. Thousands of women who were bringing up infants and toddlers had their pay cut by 23% and were in many cases forced into work programs and quite often had to put their children into the care of strangers and/or unsafe situations. All of this because some stupid rednecks (golf pros, used car salesmen, etc.) decided all single mothers did was drink beer and watch TV all day. I really didn't think this could happen in a civilized

society, but I was just beginning my schooling in how disgusting capitalism could be.

The Harris/Eves government is long gone. Yet no one has mentioned bringing back aid for single parents, the truth being that over the past few decades capitalism has managed to un-reform itself and has no interest in further reform. To get back on subject, the Harris government had managed to cancel aid for mothers and their children, and the Liberals have no interest in righting this wrong.

Many people who were disabled were put back on general welfare. One individual we worked with had severe mental health problems and couldn't afford any medication. On top of this he had had one leg blown off in a war and due to infection the other leg was scheduled to be amputated. This man received a letter a few months after he had applied for disability stating that he was not a person with a disability. Since then OCAP has corrected the stupidity of the agency involved and the man is on disability where he belongs. In another case a man with very severe developmental problems ran into us at a rally we had in the early nineties. Since the change in the law he had been wandering the streets - he actually lived in an abandoned car. He had been on Family Benefits before Harris came along and had been doing well. When Harris changed the system this man lost his home, couldn't stay in a shelter as people were unwilling to put up with his disability, and had his monthly cheque changed from \$900+ to \$190. Since this man had a lot of trouble functioning in society he found himself forced to steal in some situations. Along the way this man became known to the police, many lawyers, and many judges. All these so-called professional people could do to help him was throw him in the Don Jail. Today this man lives in his own apartment and collects ODSP thanks to OCAP.

Another horrible thing that happened during the dark Tory days was that the overwhelming majority of social workers who worked at welfare were replaced by people who looked at people and made judgments on situations only through the financial aspects