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Rich Coleman reveals true face of a government that has failed to help the poor

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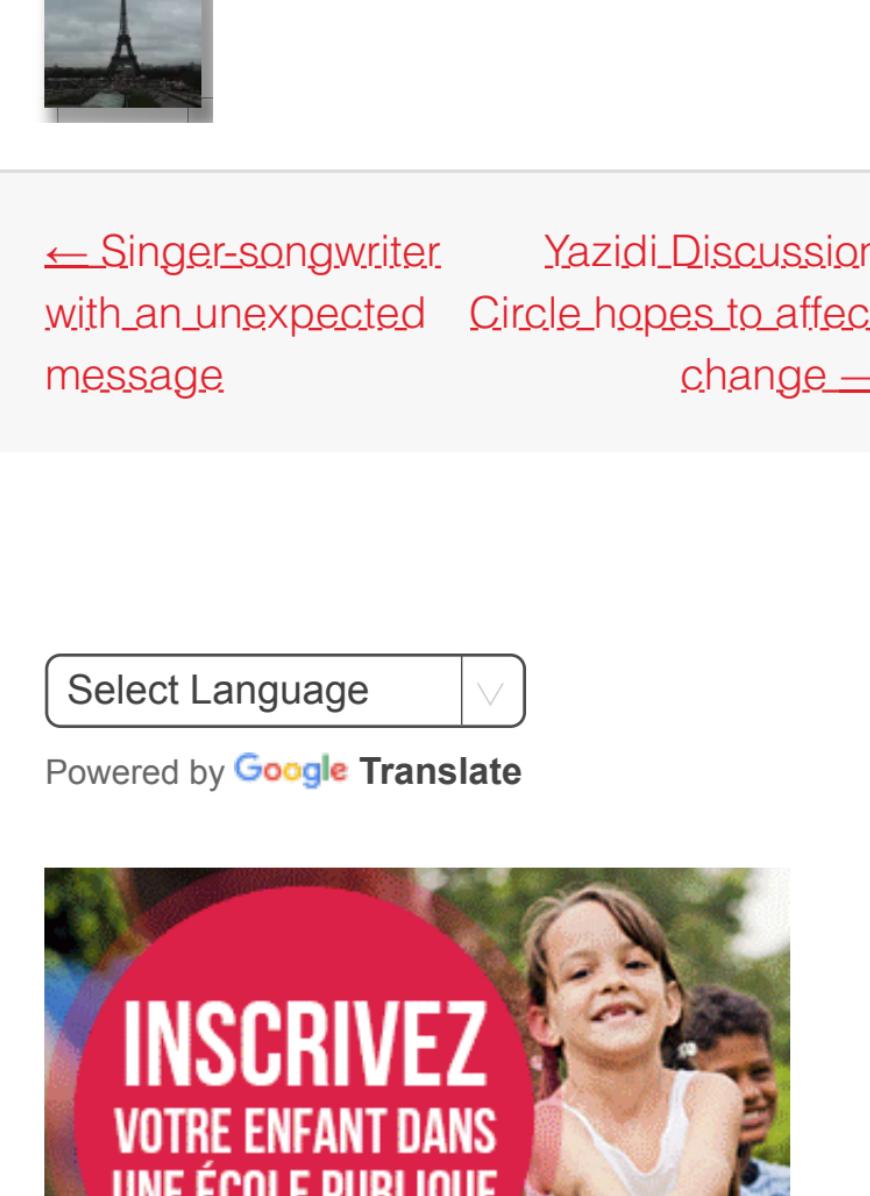
This month included a rare sighting at the provincial legislature in Victoria: politicians doing their jobs and actually debating in that underused public building. After Premier Christy Clark cancelled the fall session, the legislature is briefly convening before the Liberals, NDP, and Greens head out on the campaign trail for the election in May.

The latest session of the legislature may be short, but there have been some memorable moments. During a debate on Feb. 16, to take one example, Liberal MLA Rich Coleman defended his government's record on poverty: "We have to remember that a person on social assistance, a single person on social assistance in British Columbia, gets double the annual income of a person in the Third World."

When this remark drew howls from the opposition benches, Coleman taunted his critics in a Trump-like manner: "I know you don't like it when I tell you how good this country is, but that's fine. All I ever hear is negative, negative, negative, destructive, pessimistic attitude..."

Later that day NDP MLA Lana Popham blasted Coleman, tweeting that his behaviour in the legislature had been "astoundingly unprofessional."

Rich Coleman's performance is, however, revealing of the character of the professional politicians who make up the current government.



MLA Rich Coleman behaved in a Trump-like manner in the BC legislature. | Photo courtesy of Province of British Columbia

Coleman is not some powerless backbencher going on a rant. He is the second most powerful politician in the B.C. government, wearing multiple hats as deputy premier, minister of natural gas, and minister responsible for housing. Because of that, it's fair game to say that his comments reflect the callousness and irresponsibility of this government. Rather than address the needs of the most destitute and precarious people in this province, they prefer to make excuses based on irrelevant comparisons and to denigrate anyone raising these critical issues.

It's fair game to say Coleman's comments reflect a government that just doesn't care about the poor, because for 16 years they've failed to show us otherwise. Social assistance rates have stagnated while the cost of living has soared. Homelessness is at record levels, and the crisis of housing affordability puts tens of thousands of households one paycheque away from eviction. Surely the minister responsible for housing is aware that the rent is a little higher in Vancouver than in Nanaimo?

Faced with a government of this character, there is little point in "speaking truth to power." The Liberals have shown they don't care, and apparently when you raise issues with them they'll just accuse you of bellyaching anyway. Far better to change who's in power so that the truth will have a chance of not falling on deaf ears.

Thankfully there's an election in just over two months, and people in B.C. will have a chance to decide whether to grant another four years to this government.

Unfortunately, given the current state of our politics, there's a tendency to ignore or give short shrift to matters related to poverty reduction during election campaigns. Parties, even those with a strong mandate from their members to work to reduce inequality, tend obsessively on the so-called "middle class." (Justin Trudeau, rather than utter terms like working class or poor, has instead sometimes referred to "those aspiring to join the middle class.")

What's lost when we don't talk about these things are the real people at the bottom of this province's social and economic hierarchy. It's not pessimistic to talk about improving conditions for the poor. What's really pessimistic is the old saying, echoed in the rhetoric of politicians like Coleman, that "the poor will always be with us."

Thankfully there are many social movement campaigns coming together to address the crisis of poverty in B.C. Starting Feb. 25, the Poverty Reduction Coalition of B.C. will be organizing a Poverty Free B.C. week of action, culminating in a rally outside the Vancouver Public Library at 12 Noon on March 4. Events throughout the week will highlight potential solutions to the crisis, including increasing the minimum wage, significantly raising social assistance rates and implementing affordable childcare across the province.

Concrete solutions to reduce and eliminate poverty are available. In a province as wealthy as B.C., all we need is the political will. It seems the rich will always be with us, but it's about time we made them pay something closer to their fair share in taxes. That's all it would take to make poverty history. To deny this possibility while defending the privileges of the rich and super-rich is the worst kind of negative and pessimistic politics.

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