

**Nick Saul – The Stop Community Food Centre**  
**April 14, 2008**

Good morning and a warm welcome to you all. I'm Nick Saul, I work at a neighbourhood-based organization in the west-end called The Stop Community Food Centre. This is going to be a great day. 500 people in this room, representing thousands more across the province, committed to tackling poverty and creating a province that works for all its citizens, a province where people have access to safe, good paying jobs, help if they hit hard times, dignified support if they're unable to work, affordable housing, child care, adequately resourced schools. These are just a few of the things we'll be discussing today and that we need our provincial government to deliver on.

Before we get going – networking, sharing strategies, developing and strengthening our voice and our movement – I want to flag a few things that we can be thinking about as we move through today.....as we discuss the founding declaration of 25 in 5 and participate in the great line-up of workshops this afternoon.

You'd have to be the most jaded of souls not to feel a sense of possibility about the current moment, feel that we have a real opportunity to take on poverty and create a more equitable and socially just province. There are many positive signs out there:

For starters, check out this room. Last time we met, interest was so great we had to move venues. Today's forum, in a bigger space, is bursting at the seams, we had to turn people away.....next time we'll book Massey Hall with the Air Canada Centre as back-up. There is energy building across this province for tackling poverty – look at the Hamilton roundtable on poverty reduction, the Northumberland poverty reduction action committee, Toronto's Voices from the Street; we're mobilizing people, raising awareness about the devastating impact of poverty on peoples lives, we're offering tangible, achievable solutions. People living in poverty are at the heart of this campaigning. Our messaging about what we need in place for ALL Ontarians to thrive is becoming sharper and more focused. It's exciting to watch...and this organizing success, our building support among many different audiences, will make it extremely hard for our views to be ignored or marginalized. We need to keep it up!

There's also an increased public awareness of poverty and a feeling that government needs to do something about it.....recent polling certainly backs this up and it could be argued that there is a growing public sense that it's not people's individual choices that have put them in poverty; rather it's a social failure and as such governments must act by implementing social policies that create more greater equity.

We have a Liberal government that appears genuinely committed to doing something about the scourge of poverty. They've struck a strong cabinet committee with major ministries represented – finance, health, community social services. In fact, we heard they had to turn away 15-20 MPPs that wanted to be at this table. It's been a long, long time since we had a government that was interested in naming poverty as an issue, actually wrestling with it and asking our opinion on how to make headway on it.

We also know that reducing poverty is possible. Other countries and jurisdictions have found the political will to say that it's not okay for people to be excluded and marginalized. Places like the UK, Ireland and Quebec have found the courage, backed up and fostered by the kind of mobilizing that we're doing on the ground, to do

something. And the Scandinavian economies have proven that you can invest in people AND have a robust economy.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus about what works – you need to create a plan, set clear targets, focus on such things as (1) good, safe, sustaining jobs that lift working people out of poverty, (2) livable incomes that include those unable to work, (3) and strong and supportive communities – affordable housing, child care, public education and community programs that help people connect..... things that collectively we are saying need be at the heart of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy.

Clearly there's an opportunity to seize and we must leverage it as best we can.

And yet, of course, there are many challenges, resistance to a serious poverty reduction agenda:

Ideologically speaking, this room is hardly a representative sample of Ontarians – there are still many who advocate for tax cuts and the continued deregulation of our economy; we can't ever forget that the Fraser Institutes of the world are in this conversation too, with lots of resources and friends, pitching their remedy for a prosperous society and economy: less government, tax cuts, increased flexibility of the labour markets.

-There are many that adhere to the view that if you're poor it's your own fault and, as a result, government has no business, no legitimate role to play ameliorating, reducing or eradicating poverty.

We also need to keep in mind that there is ferocious competition for government dollars. Rest assured that there are many competing interests at the cabinet table where Minister Matthews sits, including those who will say that with the economy slowing down now is not the time to move on this file.

And, in spite of a cabinet committee focused on poverty reduction, there are key figures within government that would say that confronting poverty is a big expense with questionable political pay-off. Is it really worth the trouble to deliver? Will anyone notice or care if we don't?

There are many political calculations to make, but I would argue that the answer that this government comes up to a key question like "is it really worth the trouble to deliver" will depend greatly on their read of the mood of the general public.....a point that underscores how critical it is that we win the battle of the hearts and minds of Ontarians for the urgent need to reduce poverty; that we continue to mobilize people, explain our positions and make it abundantly clear to all why a poverty-free Ontario matters.

Are we up for this task? Can our movement, made up of so many diverse voices, deliver on this? The truth is the answer is still a work in progress and one of the key reasons why we're meeting today.

As I've become more involved with 25 in 5 over the past few months I've been impressed with it's willingness to embrace diversity of opinion and acknowledge the very real tensions that exist in our movement. One thing certain about today is that we won't all agree on everything AND that's absolutely OKAY. There are good, hard questions out there about strategy and the intent and direction of 25 in 5 that we need to work together on.

Are low-income people truly at the table and being heard? Do our policy ideas speak to the experience of poverty of Aboriginal peoples, racialized communities, single female

parents and persons with disabilities? Should we be tougher, more focused in our demands of this government? Are we cutting it too much slack? Moving too slowly? And what exactly is the role of 25 in 5? Should it be about convening, building trust across different organizations and sectors, nurturing/supporting various campaigns across the province OR should it lock into a couple of key policy planks and drive them hard at government?

What's exciting is that all of you here and many others are part of forming the path this growing movement will take.

Healthy movements, healthy organizations surface these kinds of questions and acknowledge tensions and differences with an eye to creating a space where people can move forward together; how do we capture the benefits of working in a decentralized way, in our many communities, AND, at the same time, capitalize on the real clout that comes from working together; we need to find a way to use our differences creatively because, at the end of the day, everyone in this room wants to get to the same place...a more inclusive, socially just Ontario, a province that takes care of its most important resource – its people....all its people.

So in the time we have today we want you all to be talking about these issues and grappling with these questions....and through the many discussions tell us how we build a strong, connected and EFFECTIVE movement. It's an important moment and I truly believe that in the coming months we can translate the "feeling" of possibility into real, tangible outcomes for the many thousands of people in this province that are being left behind.