



A tale of two cities

The haves and the have nots in Kelowna

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” So begins Charles Dickens’ famous *A Tale of Two Cities*. Although his great work was actually about life in two different cities, the quote seems apt as I reflect on the socio-political ethos of Kelowna.

It is, of course, a singular city in the jurisdictional sense. But the people who call the city home do not have the same experience of this place. While there is a great many living in relative affluence, there are also tens of thousands of residents who struggle to get by every day.

However, Kelowna likes to portray itself as a land of plenty, and many of the stories and images portrayed in public discourse reiterate this idea. We hear and see stories of the burgeoning wine industry (it rakes in billions); the booming real estate market (average home prices have tripled in 15 years); the innovative tech sector (“Kelowna might become our Silicon Valley”); the excited tourists who flock to Kelowna each summer, boats in tow, wallets full, to this veritable leisurely playground.

Public displays of poverty inconvenience this narrative. The mayor announced he is going to take action to reduce “delinquency” among the city’s street population, inconveniently concentrated just two streets over from our immaculately clean, shop-laden, tourist-ready Bernard Strip. Some action has already been taken: the City has proposed new bylaws to increase the fines for panhandling to deter begging (but lower fines

for those with loud cars and boats). If the bylaws pass, even someone who offers a couple beer cans to a binner (someone who collects and recycles beverage containers for a living) could be charged \$250.

This action against our most marginalized seems a bit draconian. If “safety” of our residents is really what the City is concerned about, they could look at other jurisdictions, like Vancouver, which opted to develop programs to increase collaboration among residents and binners (who are also residents), instead of criminalizing them.

Perhaps our politicians are focused on cracking down on street populations because they’d like us to think our poverty problem is localized to the approximately 506 homeless individuals in the city. Although these individuals may experience poverty more deeply, poverty extends well beyond this population. This breadth of poverty, however, may often be invisible (or, invisibilized—that is, made invisible).

Let’s consider some statistics: 47 per cent of renters in this city spend more than a third of their income on housing. This is what is called “core housing need.” About 30 per cent of Kelowna residents are renters, so that means nearly 18,000 individuals in Kelowna are in core housing need.

One would expect this number to climb, as increases in average rent far outpace average wage increases. For example, between 2016 and 2017, average rents for a one-bedroom apartment in

Kelowna increased by 15 per cent.

With so much income going to shelter, people in core housing need have less for food, clothing, recreation, and general wellbeing.

The BC Poverty Reduction Coalition recently developed a survey as a way for individuals affected by poverty or economic hardship to have their voices heard in the province’s public consultation process for a poverty reduction strategy.

Only 45 individuals filled out the survey—a fraction, I’m well aware, of the individuals who are struggling in this city.

When asked about the of impacts of the high cost of living, people said things like: “Skipping meals so my child can eat.” “Move where there’s cheaper rent.” “I have no social life because I can’t afford to do anything.” “Lost home of 15 years.” “Not filling prescriptions.” “Not able to eat healthy.”

How many individuals in this city are dealing with these issues? And why do we hear so much from the well to-do—like Albertans who own second homes here and are upset about the newly-introduced speculation tax—but not people who are barely scraping by, who can’t afford rent or nutritious food for their children?

I think I know why. Interests that represent the business community, the tourist economy, the real estate and development sectors, are much more organized. The institutions that represent their interests are very

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skilled at getting their narratives into the media, and into the ears of politicians, but there are precious few groups here who advocate with or on behalf of poor or working people. Service providers do great work, but they generally do not enter into the realm of politics.

It seems like the lion's share of the stories we hear and the politics

that are advanced by-and-large address and serve the interests of the wealthy. Not that policies that benefit the wealthy are always in opposition to policies that benefit the poor and working class. But often, addressing inequality means redistributing wealth—and the wealthy tend to push back hard.

Earlier this spring, I attended a BC Liberal Party's rally against the property speculation tax. When I got up to the mic, I asked who in the audience of 300 was a renter. About 10 people raised their hands.

It doesn't surprise me that poor and working people (who are more often renters) do not attend events like that. Many do not have the time—or have enough trust that their voices will be heard—to engage

in the political process. People who are working one or more jobs, raising families, taking an extra hour each day on transit routes cannot afford to free up extra time.

Kelowna is, actually, a land of plenty. There is so much beauty; social, cultural and economic resources here. I believe that we have enough so that no one will have to worry where their next meal is coming from, or whether they will be kicked out of their home because they had medical bills that tapped into rent money.

I think to achieve this, we need organizations and political institutions that take into account the needs of all people here, not just the people for whom it is “the best of times.” 

Christine Mettler is the Okanagan Coordinator with the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition. Get involved in advocating for change by e-mailing her at: christine@bcpovertyreduction.ca.

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