

Scrooge 2016

By Tony Pearson

Now that the turkey has been picked clean, the wrapping paper recycled, and holiday music has finally departed the airwaves, it might be time to reflect on the message which the writer who virtually invented modern Christmas celebrations was trying to get across. I refer of course to Charles Dickens, the author of *A Christmas Carol*, a book which was first published over a century and a half ago.

A little known fact about this well-known work: its original purpose was to raise awareness of the need for social and economic reform. Dickens had a troubled childhood, during which he was forced to leave school and work in a factory producing boot polish, after his father was jailed for debt. He eventually became a popular journalist and writer, but never lost a sense of anger at the abominable conditions in which England's poor had to live.

In 1843, Dickens investigated the use of children in Cornish tin mines and in the textile factories of Manchester, and wanted to publish a political pamphlet entitled *An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child*. However, he then had a better idea - make poverty the centrepiece of a short novel. He declared that it would become a 'sledgehammer' with much more force than a pamphlet.

At that time, most poor people had to work in factories at near-starvation wages, while living in shacks and shelters, eight to 10 people per room, with either one communal toilet or none at all. Diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis were rampant. Life expectancy was low, and children had no access to education. Those who couldn't find jobs were sent to 'workhouses,' where they broke rocks or trod on a treadmill for hours. (So much for 'the good old days'.?)

Like many employers of the era, Scrooge didn't just hate Christmas; he disliked any attempt to relieve poverty or improve living conditions. Asked for a charitable contribution, he asks whether there are no longer prisons or workhouses, which should take care of the situation. Told that families would die, he replies 'Then they had better do so, and decrease the surplus population.' He pays his clerk a miserable salary, and begrudges him taking Christmas Day off.

So when the ghosts visit, they show him the consequences of poverty, like Tiny Tim's disease, and in particular, two emaciated young children, named 'Want' and 'Ignorance.' The Ghost tells all of London that if these children are not taken care of, 'doom' is the sure consequence.

When Scrooge finally repents of his cold-heartedness, as we all remember, he sends Bob Cratchit's family a turkey. But more to the point, he gives Cratchit a generous raise.

We are long past those awful times of the Industrial Revolution. We now have universal health care and public education. But some of Scrooge's pre-ghosts sentiments still linger. Social assistance rates remain low, because modern-day Scrooges worry that poor people will simply 'waste' added money (even though it's been conclusively proven this is not true).

People on social assistance are considerably deeper in poverty today than they were two decades ago. A single person receiving Ontario Works is now \$12,000 below the poverty line. They must live on about \$700 a month; that's for shelter, food, clothing and power.

Oh, did someone mention that hydro rates are soaring out of control? That many people have to choose between heat and housing? That's a situation right out of Dickens.

The province has made noises about establishing a guaranteed income. Talk should become action; almost 50 years ago, a highly successful guaranteed income experiment was set up in Manitoba. It was allowed to lapse despite its success.

One of the advantages of a guaranteed income is that it removes a lot of the current disincentives that penalize people trying to move off social assistance and into jobs. That's why social assistance today is like the treadmills of Dickens' time. Part-time work, more training - all these are penalized if you're on Ontario Works. Not so with the guaranteed income plan.

A long time ago, around the end of the last ice age, I wrote a college research paper on the impact of family allowances (also known as 'baby bonuses?'). These started at the end of the Second World War. A lot of respectable Scrooges were against them - 'They'll just get spent on beer and whiskey,' was the cry.

Surprise - what they did was invigorate the Canadian economy. At the end of the First World War, the reduction of military spending led to an economic depression. But in 1945, family allowances poured money into the economy just in time to launch an economic boom.

Scrooge found that generosity brought him far more happiness than miserly behaviour. Wouldn't it be great if Ontario public policy had the same conversion? Then we could echo what Tiny Tim says at the end of Dickens' tale: 'God bless us, everyone.'