

ANALYSIS: Add women, change budgets? Underused gender policy tool finds new fans in Trudeau's cabinet ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Fall economic statement said 2017 budget will feature 'rigorous' gender-based analysis.

There's a T-shirt for sale on the Liberal Party's website that features the slogan "Add women... change politics."

You can't say self-described "feminist" Justin Trudeau isn't trying.

First, he picked a half-female cabinet. Four of the five Liberal candidates in the by-elections now underway are women — including those in three ridings Liberals won in 2015 and look to win again.

But changing politics — or its politicians — is one thing. Changing policy is another.

That's one of the reasons March 22's federal budget will be worth watching.

The finance department will include something that's never been offered before: a gender-based analysis for budget measures.

It's the latest way Liberals are trying to walk the talk they campaigned on in the last election.

"We will consider the gender impacts of the decisions we make," the Liberal platform promised. "Public policies affect women and men in different ways."

Finance Minister Bill Morneau's fall economic statement promised "more rigorous analysis" to "deliver real and meaningful change."

But what does that mean?

Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos offered reporters a preview last Friday. One of highest-profile things his government introduced so far is a good example of more gender-sensitive policy, he said.

The Canada Child Benefit (CCB) is helping lift about 200,000 parents out of poverty, and about 70 per cent of those are mothers, he said.

"Almost half of the children that are being lifted out of poverty because of the CCB are in single-parent families. And 90 per cent of these single-parent families are headed by women," the minister said.

Not just about women

Trudeau's team didn't invent gender-based analysis.

Canada made a commitment at the 1995 United Nations conference on women to "ensure that before policy decisions are taken, an analysis of their impact on women and men, respectively, is carried out."

But progress in the 22 years since has been slow.

The auditor general has scolded the government twice for its tepid embrace of gender analysis, most recently after an audit completed in the final year of the former Conservative government.

Among over 100 federal departments and agencies, only 30 had committed to it by early 2015, and six of those hadn't fully implemented it.

Four departments that were doing gender analyses were examined by the auditor general, who in 2015 found incomplete work that lacked enough evidence for decision-makers.

The Liberal platform promised to do better. "We will also ensure that federal departments are conducting the gender-based impact analyses that have been required of them for the past 20 years," it said.

It's not only about advocating for women. Status of Women Canada says the government's current requirements go beyond gender-based analysis: analyzing not just gender, but also age, education, language, geography, culture and income to find ways some aren't equal to others.

"Have you or someone you know taken parental leave, been treated for heart disease or recently immigrated to Canada?" its website says, offering examples of policy shaped by studying inequalities.

Equality equals economic growth?

Officials admit things aren't fully in place across every department this spring. But starting from the top and trickling down, it's clear this way of thinking is the new intended normal.

The privy council office is asking for gender analysis when policy proposals are prepared for cabinet.

Duclos said gender parity among ministers making those decisions has already had "tremendous value."

"It's been extremely satisfying to see both the level of actions and the attitudes, how that changes," he said.

Asked for examples of policy from his shop now shaped by gender analysis, Duclos names two areas: housing and child care.

The budget will offer more details, he said, following recent work with the provinces.

Duclos, an economist before entering politics, is on a pre-budget tour this week, putting down markers for how Morneau's budget will promote economic growth.

He laid out three things Liberals are focusing on — innovation, public and private capital, and labour, or human capital.

Making it easier to start or return to work — offering training or child care, for example — improves labour force participation rates and in turn, overall productivity. And more people working improves economic growth.

"We're sensitive to both economic inclusion and social inclusion," he said. "It involves all characteristics beyond income that make it difficult sometimes for Canadians to feel included in our society. And gender is one."

Spending proposals submitted to the Treasury Board now must include proof that gender was considered.

A form available online that civil servants use for Treasury Board submissions asks for evidence and data sources, as well as a plan for monitoring what happens after a program starts.

That fits with the Trudeau government's affection for "deliverology" — measuring results, not just the initial splash of an announcement.

Widespread compliance with bureaucratic processes isn't the end goal. Equal opportunities are.

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