

Morley: What's the future for a Canadian child born in 2020? ^[1]

Will this youngster have access to high quality child care and early learning? Inequalities in child and youth well-being show up in the first few years of life.

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EXCERPTS

In the first minutes of the New Year, the first Canadian baby of 2020 will be born. We will celebrate this arrival as a symbol of our future and the unlimited possibilities a country like ours offers to our children. The parents will simply hope their child has a happy future; in fact, when asked what they most wish for their children, Canadian parents prioritize happiness more than parents in almost any other country.

But as we consider this baby's future, I offer some questions we should all be asking.

First, will the parents be able to take time off work in the crucial early months?

The current rules for parental benefits outside Quebec provide only 55 per cent of salary for eligible parents, a steep drop in earnings that is a hardship for many on parental leave. The current system also disproportionately excludes adoptive parents, Indigenous mothers and those with precarious or non-standard employment.

I am not alone in my concerns.

A survey by Fuse Insights on behalf of UNICEF Canada found that 79 per cent of Canadians agree that adequately paid parental leave is a key part of giving children the best possible start in life. And 77 per cent say it's important for the government to ensure new parents can afford to take proper time to care for their babies.

Will this child have access to high-quality child care and early learning? Inequalities in child and youth well-being show up in the first few years of life. If the federal government earmarked six per cent of the federal budget for children under six, each one could start life strong.

Will the child grow up one of the 20 per cent of children in Canada living in poverty? The 42nd Parliament made progress on reducing child poverty; the 43rd Parliament could eliminate it. Will we make the investments in lower-income families to achieve this important goal?

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Will this child have access to the same services as other children in Canada? If the child is First Nations, we cannot be certain until the federal government commits to implementing the Spirit Bear Plan, to ensure equitable spending on public services for these children. This includes essentials that all children have the right to: clean water, health care, education and protection.

Will this child sometimes go to bed or school hungry, like one in every four children in Canada? Or will the federal government pass legislation to implement a universal school food program, to provide at least one healthy meal each day? Or will we remain the only G7 country that does not have one?

Will this child have to wait until age 18 to vote? Will decision-makers listen and take his or her opinions seriously? Or will this youngster be missing school to protest against the actions or inactions of those in power, like today's teenage generation has had to do?

Will climate change continue to threaten the child's future? Or will adults have risen to the challenge of the global climate emergency?

Will Canada still rank 25th out of 41 rich countries in child and youth well-being by the end of the next decade? Or will we move into the ranks of those countries that are the best places to grow up?

And what about the government's commitment to helping children born today in less affluent countries? Despite a great deal of progress on child and maternal health, 7,000 newborns are still dying every day from preventable diseases. Seventy-five million children aged 3 to 18 are in urgent need of educational support in crisis-affected countries. Twenty-four thousand children were killed or maimed in conflicts in 2018 with near impunity, the highest number ever reported by the UN since it began monitoring violations against children nearly 15 years ago. Who is standing up for these children?

The answers to these questions depend on all of us and how we collectively respond to the challenges facing childhood in 2020.

My New Year's Resolution is to defend the right to a childhood of every child. My final question: What will be your resolution?

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