

The election no one wanted is ultimately about child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At just about this stage in a campaign, an election comes to be about something. Each party already knows what it wants that “something” to be.

In this case, for the Liberals it’s about moving “Forward. For Everyone”; the Conservatives intend to “Secure the Future”; and the NDP are “Fighting for You” — with all that these slogans are intended to imply.

But little by little, day by day, the public decides. And what we decide is rarely predictable. What is this election about?

The answer, for me, relates to a few other more basic questions. From what we know about each party, what would each do that the others wouldn’t do that would have the biggest impact on Canada, now and in the future? Not what promises they’ve made, or what they call “commitments,” but as best we can know, what they would deliver.

I think this election is about child care.

I may not seem a reliable voice. I was a Liberal member of Parliament and cabinet minister under Paul Martin. I was the minister of social development in that government, with the task of implementing the party’s promise made during the 2004 campaign to spend \$5 billion over five years to help create a system of early learning and child care across the country.

I hope I’m not unreliable. I had no party affiliation before 2004, and I’ve had none since I lost in 2011. I don’t see myself as either a small “l” liberal or small “c” conservative, let alone a big “L” Liberal or big “C” Conservative. Those are just boxes, created at someone else’s convenience, that trap and cut you off from all kinds of other important ways of thinking and doing. Rather, I think I’m like most Canadians: I want the best for the most people, however that is achieved, whatever instrument is used, no matter how others characterize it. During my four campaigns I thought this best result would more likely happen through a Liberal government, and in 2004, the public tentatively agreed. Two years later, it tentatively disagreed. And in 2008 and 2011, vehemently disagreed.

Each party thinks it is very different from every other party. It has to think that way, in order to work so hard to implement the difficult stuff — but it also needs to realize that it isn’t. In the 154 years since Confederation, Canada has always had either a Liberal or a Conservative government, except for four years between 1917 and 1921, where there was a “Unionist” government made up of former Conservatives and Liberals.

This may all change in the future, but one government is mostly a close variation of another — though our parties don’t like to think so. The outgoing one is “tired,” the incoming one is “fresh,” yet the “tax and spend” Liberals, in office, aren’t quite so different from the “cut and slash” Conservatives, and vice versa. In history’s rearview mirror, there have been few indispensable prime ministers, few indispensable governments. So long as we don’t take what we have for granted, the country — some collective common sense and intelligence — survives all of us.

So why isn’t this election about climate change, or fiscal responsibility? I know that the parties say it is, and I think they believe what they say. And in the larger scheme of things those questions may be more important than child care. But beyond promises and “commitments,” I haven’t seen the Liberals deliver on climate change. Maybe they will. But I don’t know.

Given the difficulties of the pandemic, our recovery and the future, I’m not sure how the Conservatives, in power, would deliver on fiscal responsibility. Maybe they would. But I don’t know. I don’t know, we don’t know, if these “commitments” will be delivered on.

I think child care is clearer. It’s absolutely true that child-care promises have been made and broken for decades. But agreements between the federal government and many of the provinces have now been made, agreements that would need to be met if the Liberals remain in office. This is already in motion. If the Conservatives win, they’ve promised to go another way. They made the same promise in 2006, and won, and delivered on their promise. If they win this time, it would again be their right.

Either way, the ramifications of whether or not we have a system of child care are immense for all of us. A child-care system costs a lot of money. And this isn’t a regular government program that is here when one party is in power, and gone when it’s another. Once in place, like

our education system, like our health-care system — each so much part of the way we live and how we do things — it would be forever in place. For supporters of child care, that is the good news. For opponents, the bad.

We talk about “elementary school,” “high school,” and “post-secondary.” Child care isn’t really child care, or daycare, or even early learning — it’s pre-elementary school. Both educational and custodial, just as our elementary and high schools are. It is part of our system of learning, age-appropriate, that extends from pre-elementary to post-secondary and helps prepare our children for the future. Once in place, it will stay in place — make no mistake.

Of all the issues this election might be about, in place or rejected, child care will have the biggest effect.

This election that no one wanted is actually about something.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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