

Social policy in hands of novice [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Seldom are political commentators, social activists and child-care advocates reduced to baffled silence.

But the appointment of Diane Finley as Canada's new minister of human resources and social development is such a puzzle that no one knows what to say.

The 48-year-old businesswoman, who represents the riding of Haldimand-Norfolk, has never displayed any interest in social issues. She was Conservative agriculture critic in the last Parliament.

Nothing in her private career suggests a desire to work with kids or the unemployed.

Finley and her husband Doug, who was Prime Minister Stephen Harper's campaign manager in the recent election, operated a consulting firm before she ran for office. Prior to that, she worked for the Laidlaw conglomerate, building its fleet of private ambulances in southern Ontario.

Most of her voluntary affiliations are in the health-care sector. She chaired the Brant Community Care Access Centre and served on the National Standards Committee of the Paramedic Association and the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships.

Her education is business-oriented. She has a BA in administrative studies and an MBA from the University of Western Ontario.

Most observers guessed Finley would get the agriculture portfolio, if she were named to cabinet at all.

Harper's decision to put her in charge of the sprawling ministry of human resources and social development (split between Ken Dryden and Belinda Stronach in the last cabinet) has left them dumbfounded. The \$30 billion department is responsible for everything from children's programs and student loans to employment insurance and old age security.

One thing is clear: The rookie minister will be no impediment to Harper's plan to dismantle Canada's embryonic child-care system.

The Prime Minister's first announcement, after being sworn in, was that his government's "choice in child care" allowances would start to flow on July 1. At the same time, he reiterated his intention to withdraw from the child-care agreements negotiated between Ottawa and the provinces last year.

As the inevitable complaints poured in from the premiers, Harper handled the outcry himself. Given the political stakes — all three federal opposition parties oppose his plan — he isn't likely to hand off the file to a neophyte with 19 months' political experience.

The child-care battle will be fought at the highest level.

It is equally plausible that no one in Harper's inner circle has given much thought to the social affairs ministry.

Cabinet making involves a mix of deliberation and improvisation. Once the top spots — finance, foreign affairs, health, justice and public safety — are filled, the rest of the exercise usually comes down to plugging the remaining candidates into available openings.

Finley's qualifications and preferences may have had little to do with the department to which she was assigned.

Although it is too early to draw firm conclusions, two general propositions seem reasonable.

People concerned about social policy should develop stronger links with their provincial government. That is where the action is likely to be in the next few years.

The showdown over child care will set the template for the Harper years. If the Prime Minister succeeds in replacing Canada's nascent child-care system with an allowance to parents, his government will promote other market solutions to family needs.

A period of thought-gathering silence might not be such a bad thing. Big changes lie ahead.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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