

# Future of children on line in election [CA]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

With just over two weeks to go until election day, the outcome remains a toss-up, with further movement in the polls almost certain as the Liberal and Conservative campaign teams continue their battle.

Yet the campaign is not simply about whom voters like better, Paul Martin or Stephen Harper. There are major differences between Martin and Harper over the nature of Canada and what kind of future matters.

Perhaps nothing illustrates this better than their opposing policies on children. While this may not seem like a business or economic issue, it is. It affects working parents, which affects the workplace. And, even more importantly, it affects the life chances of our youngest people and the quality of our future population, which is the workforce of tomorrow.

Martin is a strong advocate of a universal program of early childhood development. This is based on both evidence from the growing knowledge of how the human brain develops and from social science research on the experience of young children.

The evidence from neurobiology clearly shows that the trajectories for adult learning, health and coping skills are set early in life and that a positive program of early childhood development can enhance the capabilities of youngsters and better ensure they are ready to learn when they enter the school system.

This is why James Heckman, the University of Chicago economist and winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, has argued that "the best evidence supports the policy prescription Invest in the very young and improve basic learning and socialization skills."

In the 2004 federal election campaign, Martin promised to invest \$5 billion over five years to establish a Canada-wide program for early childhood development. All 10 provinces have since signed agreements to participate, based on so-called QUAD principles of quality, universality, accessibility and development. In this election campaign, Martin has promised to invest another \$6 billion, starting in 2009, so that the program runs to at least 2015.

For his part, Harper has come up with his own alternative, which is dismissive of the goal of universal early childhood development programs and pledges instead to give provide every family with a child under the age of 6 with \$100 a month to spend whatever way they want, including on babysitters, neighbours or encouraging a parent to stay home. The \$100 would be taxable.

Harper defends his position by arguing that parents know best and should be able to choose. Martin's approach, Harper argues, only benefits those parents who want to place their children in regulated and formal programs. Harper has also implied that a Conservative government would reconsider opting out of existing agreements with the provinces.

But early childhood development is much more ambitious than what is known as daycare or child care. Daycare can simply mean babysitting or unstructured care but early childhood development, which closely involves parents, represents a commitment to pedagogically-based nurturing and play-based learning, including music, art and games, to achieve a readiness for learning as children enter the school system.

The experience in many communities is that this kind of early childhood centre, working with parents, is clearly beneficial to the parents as well, which is important since they remain the primary caregivers. This is why communities are receptive to this approach.

The Scandinavian countries provide the best examples of a serious commitment to early childhood development. Not surprisingly, Finland and Sweden have the most literate and numerate populations in the Western world. Moreover, these high levels of achievement are found across all socio-economic groups. Finland and Sweden also rank ahead of Canada in overall competitiveness, according to the World Economic Forum. They clearly demonstrate that the quality of the population determines the quality of present and future society.

So children obviously face different futures, depending on whether Martin's approach, or Harper's, is followed in the years ahead. But so do Canadian society and the economy. Differences do matter.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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