

What kind of Canada do we really want? [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Dec 2005

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Driving the differences between the Liberal and Conservative plans for child care are two very different conceptions of the role of government and two different philosophies about how Canada should approach the pressing problem of productivity. At last we may be having a debate, not just a series of policy announcements.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper proposed to terminate, by the end of the 2006-'07 fiscal year, the \$5 billion child-care agreements the Liberal government negotiated with the provinces and to use the money instead, combined with another \$6 billion, to give parents \$1,200 a year for each child under age 6.

Prime Minister Paul Martin then countered with an announcement of another \$6 billion toward his plan, so each party is committed to an \$11 billion program, but delivered in fundamentally different ways.

The Conservatives would give the money directly to parents, allowing them to spend it as they wish.

The Liberals propose to invest in a national daycare system, slightly different in each province, but the goal is to create a system: a set of publicly supported institutions that will gradually add an early child-care component to our existing infrastructure of publicly supported schools.

Both concepts have merit, but the values underlining them contend. Individual choice or societal equality?

The debate over child-care reflects, in important ways, different concepts of productivity.

Giving money directly to parents is like giving tax cuts to companies and individuals in the hope that their individual choices will make the economy more productive.

This is the constant refrain for most economists.

But, there is an alternative productivity strategy of investing in people — early child care, training, aboriginal peoples, the disabled, immigrants, lifelong learning — so that Canada will have the best quality workforce in the world. This is directed investment.

Along with investing in people, we need investment in infrastructure, especially in our cities. Public transit, shelter for the homeless, Internet connectivity for rural areas, will not come about through individuals having more tax cuts.

Directed investments in infrastructure and human resources or direct payments to individuals?

That is the fundamental choice before us.

Years ago, in *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith made the progressive case for public investment.

What was the use, he asked, of a wonderful private home if one could not go out at night because of unsafe streets or a deteriorating environment?

A thriving and beautiful public space is needed to complement individual choice.

Today, in the choices inherent in the competing Liberal and Conservative visions for child care, we must answer the age-old question:

Are we a community or a collective of atomized individuals?

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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