

Finally, some debate on real issues [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

You can see this wintery federal election campaign as a disgusting and debased bidding war, or you can see it as an overdue opportunity to make government more attentive and useful. Personally, I'm finding it a tremendous relief, after Gomery and the familiar discourse of discontent, to detect the first glimmer of real choices on real issues.

This week, for instance, debate has focused on child care, with the Liberals promising Tuesday to extend their fledgling national day-care system to 2015 with a view to making it permanent. That means \$11 billion instead of \$5 billion in federal funding, and the announcement should give the provinces - who will design and deliver the service - the commitment they need to proceed.

Prime Minister Paul Martin portrays this long-promised program as the next medicare, "a lasting addition to our social foundation." Yes, the timing is suspect, coming as it does one day after Stephen Harper laid out his \$10.9-billion child-care plan. But it's better late than never. If it takes an imminent election and the threat of an abrupt and unwelcome career setback to galvanize the reluctant Martin to action, so be it.

The virtue of Martin's plan is that it is national, but flexible: Each province gets to design its own delivery system, provided it meets some conditions. In other times, this approach may even have found favour with the decentralizing, premier-friendly Harper. But not this week. In the snowy, rocky Newfoundland outport of Petty Harbour Tuesday, the Conservative leader accused Martin of "transferring money from one group of politicians to another."

"In fact," says Harper, "the only people who should be making these choices are parents. Not politicians. Not government." He calls Martin's "national system of institutional daycare" the "Henry Ford model: you can chose any colour you like, as long as it's black." Give money directly to parents and let them shop for the kind of care they like, he says.

And that is exactly what he proposed this week: \$1,200 per year for every child under six and another \$1.25 billion in tax incentives to encourage companies and community groups to provide some 125,000 new day-care spaces over five years. The virtue of Harper's plan is that it is simple and politically saleable. As he points out, "the Liberals like to talk about child care a lot, but parents tell me they haven't seen any."

And that is the problem with the Liberal approach, not only on child care. Anything that requires provincial co-operation - and almost everything does - involves long negotiations, a mixed menu of provincial responses and, for anyone looking for a new hip or a child care space, an interminable wait.

On the other hand, as Martin points out, Harper's child-care allowance amounts to \$25 a week per child, which pays for one day of care. What are low- and middle-income Canadians going to do the rest of the week?

What this means is that everyone's vote matters this time. Elect a Harper government and the newborn national child-care program could be shut down after one year in favour of a relabelled "baby bonus." Elect a Martin government and enjoy reductions in income tax, but no break on the GST - at least not so far. As for Layton, he isn't the left-wing caricature of old: he doesn't want to tax seniors, or shut down private health-care clinics, or spend the country into deficit. He hasn't made much impression in the national race, so far, but if he follows Harper's lead and concentrates on policy, he may find an open-minded audience.

Or, it could all fall apart after Christmas when everyone says the negative advertising, the "real election" begins. What a disappointment - and a mistake - that would be.

- reprinted from the Charlottetown Guardian

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