Will parents latch on to Martin's child care policy? [CA] [1]

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EXCERPTS

Throne speeches tend to be grab bags of every stray idea that catches the fancy of the government, rather than reliable road maps for legislative action. So it's hard to know just how seriously to take the many policy goals solemnly itemized. But at least one big proposal that Paul Martin highlighted this week cries out for a closer look: his vow to create a nationwide early learning and child care program.

This is far from a routine pledge. It's a bid to create a new universal social program, or something very close to one--an extension of the state's reach that hasn't happened in Canada since the Sixties. Remarkably, the Liberals pitched the notion in some detail during the spring election, and yet the ambitious idea never emerged as a major debating point--perhaps because, under Jean Chretien, the party also promised big stuff on child care, but never delivered once it won power. There are indications, though, that Martin is more determined. He put one of his highest profile new cabinet recruits, hockey hero Ken Dryden, in charge of the file as Minister of Social Development. And, in his own address in the House elaborating on the throne speech, the Prime Minister closely linked the child care initiative to his legacy from his days his days as finance minister.

Apparently, the strategy is to target children from poorer families at the start and then increase availability of day care up the income scale. The Liberals have in mind much more than some sort of new care subsidy for low-income kids. Martin promised a "high-quality system, open and available to all, affordable and geared to development." And the Liberals vowed in the election campaign to put those principles into legislation, so that provinces would have to meet them in order to qualify for federal funding.

Sound familiar? It should. The Canada Health Act operates exactly that way, by laying down the fundamental requirements of universal care, and enforcing them by threatening the withdrawal of Ottawa's transfer payments from provinces that fail to meet the standard. Indeed, Martin used the health care analogy in touting the child care plan in the House. "It is my belief," he said, "that like those who were in this place at the creation of medicare, and who decades later look back with such pride at that defining moment in Canadian social policy, so too will members of this House recall the forging of this important social achievement."

No other thrust from the Throne Speech inspired Martin to claim so grandly to be on the brink of making history. The way he presents the child care file makes it a point of confluence for currents from his political past. He sees the national plan flowing in part from the enlightened child tax reforms he introduced as finance minister, but also from the social policy tradition of the generation that most inspires him, that of his father, the late Paul Martin Sr.

Personal, family and party legacies are all in play here. For this Prime Minister, it's a potent mix. But does it amount to good policy? The answer is not obvious. The Liberals have committed $5 billion over five years to jump start the plan--much less than a nationwide program truly "open and available to all" would cost. Some provinces are bound to react with something short of unbridled enthusiasm to the beginning of another massive federal transfer with major strings attached. And while the idea has plenty of support among left-tilting Liberals, evidence of wider public demand for such a system is not overwhelming. The Conservatives proposed the alternative of a $2,000-per-child tax break, and since the issue didn't garner much election campaign attention, it's impossible to know which party's policy prescription would have caught the imagination of more parents. But if the Liberals press ahead with the plan in this minority parliament, expect that debate to finally catch fire. It should be at least as entertaining as guessing when the government will fall.

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