

Health, child care top Throne Speech [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A Liberal government unbowed by its reduced minority status rolled out a legislative blueprint today that steadfastly followed the party's left-leaning election platform.

The policy-setting throne speech vowed to push ahead with the top Liberal election promises of more money for health care and municipalities, and a new national child care program.

Although the Liberals clearly hope their own priorities dominate the parliamentary agenda, Prime Minister Paul Martin also signalled an intention to co-operate with other parties.

"The people of Canada want this government - and all parliamentarians - to rise above partisanship to address the public interest," said the 15-page text, read in the Senate chamber by Gov. Gen. Adrienne Clarkson.

"Each of us must take responsibility. The government will do its part to ensure that this minority Parliament works."

The government hopes major cash transfers to municipalities and the new provincially run child care programs come in the next federal budget, Finance Minister Ralph Goodale said after the speech.

The opposition Conservatives and Bloc Quebecois immediately suggested they would vote against the throne speech but it appeared unlikely the government would collapse in a confidence vote.

Child care is one of those areas where the federal government will nudge its priorities onto provincial turf. Ottawa will transfer billions to the provinces if they agree to publish statistics on the performance of their child care programs.

The reporting practice - similar to a mechanism already being put in place to fight hospital wait times - is what Canadians want, said Social Development Minister Ken Dryden.

"The public's message to us - in all kinds of areas - is they are looking for benchmarks," Dryden said.

"They are looking to see where we are, because they want to see where they are. They want to see how their kids are doing."

Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe said flatly that his party will vote against the speech.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper suggested the Tories will also oppose the speech, but said he will propose amendments.

NDP Leader Jack Layton was more upbeat, suggesting his caucus will support the speech.

"It moves in a good direction," he said. "The key issue is whether it will be more than just a speech."

Layton said Canadians don't want another election now and he has no desire to bring down the government.

The government also promised a greater effort to provide affordable shelter in Canadian cities, and reaffirmed its previous commitment to provide municipalities with a share of the federal gas tax. But there was still no indication of what the municipal share of the gasoline tax will be.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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