

A conversation with Ken Dryden [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ken Dryden has been thinking a lot about child poverty since he was named minister of social development a month ago.

He believes the biggest barrier holding back low-income kids is the way they see themselves. They dare not aim too high or expect too much. From the moment they're born, there is a "chipping away of possibilities" the 56-year-old former hockey star, lawyer and author said.

"How can we change those assumptions and expectations? A child care system can do that," Dryden said.

That is why he is so excited that the Prime Minister has put him in charge of putting in place a national child-care program. Dryden won't be able to complete the job with the \$5 billion over five years that the Liberals have pledged. But he will be able to get thousands of disadvantaged kids into an environment where they can learn and thrive and taste success.

Dryden doesn't discount the importance of affordable housing, a proper diet and an adequate family income in fighting child poverty. He just thinks that a healthy self-image is the most important asset Canada can give its youngest citizens.

During his years as Ontario youth commissioner (1984-1986) Dryden noticed that a few kids from disadvantaged backgrounds always managed to break free of the cycle of low expectations and low achievement. He asked himself why. The most common reason, he found, was that someone — a teacher, a coach, a relative, a boys and girls club leader — paid these youngsters a little extra attention and convinced them that they mattered.

That is the kind of intervention he would like to see in the earliest years of a child's life, when the odds of improving their prospects are best.

Dryden talked about his hopes, plans and priorities in a reflective interview this week.

Although he is still organizing his cabinet office and learning about his sprawling department, he knows how he intends to approach the job he once described as "just exactly what I want to be doing."

His aim is to get Canadians to see those who fall within his ministry's purview — chiefly children, the disabled and the elderly — as us, not them.

Dryden admitted, when pressed, that Ontarians didn't show much concern for their less fortunate neighbours in the mid- to late '90s, when they twice elected a provincial government that slashed welfare benefits, halted social housing and weakened child care in order to provide hefty tax cuts.

"We usually learn the hard way," he mused. "And it takes us a while."

"So you have a party that comes along and says: We'll at least put money in your pockets. And people say: Let's try it. Let's see what happens.

"Well, now we've seen what happens," Dryden said. "Maybe we're more alert, more sensitive. Maybe we've learned that we can do pretty well and our neighbours can also do better.

It is that sense of collective responsibility that Dryden hopes to tap into, as a federal cabinet minister. His department doesn't deliver many of Canada's social programs. Child care, social assistance, workers' compensation and long-term care for seniors all fall within provincial jurisdiction. But Dryden believes Canadians look to Ottawa to ensure that the nation's safety nets reflect their values.

"People don't differentiate between governments," he said. "If they've got a problem they can't fix and they're looking for answers, it's our job to help find them. The best answers will come from a whole group of people, doing what they can."

Ottawa's role, he said, is to set benchmarks, tell Canadians how well the nation is doing and pull together all levels of government and the voluntary sector to work as an effective team.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Tags: poverty ^[2]
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