

# A goal for Ken Dryden: Act on child care vows [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

In other environs, the untested ministers appointed to Prime Minister Paul Martin's new cabinet are surely a bunch of no-names. But one fledgling MP did make it into media reports as far afield as the Charlotte Observer ("former goaltending star for the Montreal Canadiens") and the Independent in the U.K.

Brand-name recognition never hurts, and the superficially unlikely pairing of Ken Dryden with the social development ministry holds the promise of turning out to be one of the more inspired decisions taken by the PM.

The Prime Minister underscored the importance of Dryden's new beat by mentioning early childhood development &mdash; or "child care" as they often call it in Ottawa &mdash; in the same breath as health care and the new-deal-for-cities agenda. Martin placed the three on an equal footing in his pledge to increase prosperity and "improve the quality of life for everyone."

Throughout the election, any proclaimed dedication by the Liberals to infant Canadians drew a wan response along the lines of we've-all-heard-that-before. And we had. More than a decade ago the Liberals' commitment to a national child care program was spun on the calculus of increasing child care spaces only following economic growth of 3 per cent per annum. It was, pardon the usage, ass-backwards. Create consistent, reliable, creative childhood development centres, and from there springs a parent in a position to make a consistent economic contribution. Create consistent, reliable, creative childhood development centres, and from there spring little ones ripe to become motivated, productive human capital. (A distasteful term, but there you have it.)

The argument matters not. Eleven years on, and still no national child care program is in place.

An electioneering Paul Martin threw a number on the table this spring: \$5 billion over five years to create 250,000 new child care spaces. It's difficult to place such numbers in a meaningful context. Statistics Canada released a survey earlier this year that determined that roughly 80 per cent of women return to work within a year of pregnancy. And an appendix to a report on early childhood education and care by the anti-poverty coalition Campaign 2000 released in May places the cost of required spaces at slightly more than \$12 billion annually based on 1.4 million children under the age of 5 requiring child care spaces.

You can't really drill into the numbers. Some spaces are funded, some aren't. Some have some funding. They may be accessible financially, they may not. The data is mushy.

Taking the positive view, child care advocates are viewing the election promise as not the answer, but a hopeful beginning for a national program that will take at least a decade to build.

It would be a positive signal if, in his early outings, Dryden would forget the \$5 billion figure, recognizing that it would sound meaningless to the vast majority of listeners. Better to paint broadly and passionately his over-all vision for the shape early childhood development should take.

In the U.K., Prime Minister Tony Blair is seizing child care as a smart pre-election initiative, not least because women voters like him a lot less now that they've seen the Iraq mess. One British newspaper reported that child care is seen politically as a "big idea" and a "win-win" - easing the financial burden on families and drawing more mothers into the tax-paying pool. Blair is talking about "under fives" as breezily as if he were discussing a G8 meeting.

There's boundless opportunity for Dryden here to have social development taken seriously. There are studies enough to inform him of the vital importance of the early years, setting the stage for life-long learning.

With a marquee name like Ken Dryden, there's the best chance in a long while that Ottawa will now not just listen, but act.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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