

Dear candidates: Don't forget Canada's children [CA] ^[1]

Comment

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EXCERPTS

It's crunch time for Canada's kids. The Campaign Against Child Poverty believes that the outcome of the federal election is critical to the needs of Canada's children. Never has an informed vote been more important; never has it been more important to insist on the absolute clarity of the commitments made by the parties wishing to govern Canada.

The CACP was delighted at the groundbreaking news that the Liberal Party was prepared to invest \$5-billion in a national child-care program and would work closely with the provinces on its implementation.

We, and child-advocacy groups across the country, applaud this dramatic initiative; it reverses years of inaction, and is a critical step to ensure the equitable treatment of Canada's children.

We are dismayed that not all parties have platforms containing this and other essential social policies that have a direct impact on the well-being of our children.

Comparing the parties' platforms is both instructive and troubling. The Liberal Party and the NDP favour a national child-care program, the strengthening of the Canada Child Tax Benefit and the provision of affordable housing. In addition, the NDP has advocated restoring a federal fiscal role to ensure that federally transferred funds intended for social assistance meet specific, Canada-wide goals. It has also pledged significant improvements to maternity/parental leave and to employment-insurance eligibility. The Bloc Québécois has strong platform commitments on affordable daycare, affordable housing, increase of federal transfers to targeted programs and improvements to maternal/parental leave and employment insurance. The Green Party has similarly strong platform planks.

Our major concern is that the Conservative Party, seemingly poised to make an electoral breakthrough, has remained largely silent on issues related to children's needs. Indeed, the Conservatives oppose a national child-care program and have made no commitment about affordable housing.

Far more worrisome is their refusal to clarify their view of the fiscally progressive child tax benefit (which to us has been a key instrument to help families meet their children's needs). When asked whether they would support the Canada Child Tax Benefit, Conservative headquarters said only that: "There is no child tax-benefit promise in the platform."

What is in the Conservative platform is a fiscally regressive \$2,000 child deduction.

The present Canada Child Tax Benefit will provide low-income families \$3,240 by 2007; the NDP pledges to raise that amount to \$4,900. The deduction proposed by the Conservatives, however, would transfer benefits from low to high earners, and raises serious questions about the future of a national, fiscally progressive, tax-based plan.

So there is a story here, and like all stories, it contains a message and a cautionary note. The story goes like this: Canada's children are not nearly as well-off as they should be, and with more than a million of them living in poverty, the goal of the all-party resolution of 1989 to end child poverty by the year 2000 seems depressingly distant. Canadians were hit with deep cuts to social programs in the mid-90s. Economic slowdowns and the focus on deficits saw the end, for example, of the Canada Assistance Program, with its accountability for federal transfers to the provinces for social services.

But, as in all good stories, there is hope. Sustained public concern has kept the issue of child poverty alive, and in response, some encouraging tax and program initiatives have strengthened the mix of income assistance and community services required for progress on child poverty. We have begun to see the glimmers of a coherent, prudent and sustained national strategy. The message of the story is clear: Compassionate public policy can work. The caution is also clear. One party has, according to its platform, little to say about Canada's most precious natural resource. A vote for that party, it seems to us, will do nothing to ensure the story has a happy ending.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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