

A forgotten question of values [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS:

Three elections have come and gone since Canada's political parties unanimously resolved to wipe out child poverty.

The Liberals have balanced the federal budget and handed out \$100 billion in tax cuts.

The Conservative party has broken up and come back together to fight for more and deeper tax cuts.

The New Democrat who put forward the 1989 resolution, former party leader Ed Broadbent, has spent 14 years in political retirement and returned to the fray to find child poverty rate higher than when he left.

Today, one out of every six Canadian children is growing up in poverty. In Toronto, the rate is a staggering one in three. Immigrant children are falling off the economic ladder. Aboriginal children are stuck on the bottom rung.

Yet no one is talking about this issue with any sense of urgency on the campaign trail. No one is asking why a decade of economic growth has left so many families behind. No one is pointing out Canadian values didn't used to include overlooking those in need.

In fairness, all of the parties have policies to reduce child poverty. But the leaders haven't highlighted them, the media haven't focused on them and the electorate, looking at Ottawa's record, assumes they'll fall off any government's priority list.

That is a reasonable bet if the Conservatives or Liberals win a comfortable majority on June 28. But if Canadians elect a minority government, the nation's poorest youngsters might finally get a break.

The party with the clearest commitment to eradicating child poverty is the NDP. Its members could end up holding the balance of power in Canada's next Parliament. Party leader Jack Layton - prompted, he freely admits, by his wife Olivia Chow - would make support for low-income families one of his conditions for propping up a minority government.

The separatist Bloc Quebecois is also a child-friendly party. Although leader Gilles Duceppe has not spelled out his price for supporting the party in power, his platform suggests he would take an enlightened approach to social issues.

How far either of the smaller parties might be able to push the Conservatives or Liberals is a matter of conjecture. But a look at the four parties' policies provides a useful starting point.

NATIONAL CHILD BENEFIT:

The federal government pays a tax-free monthly benefit to low and middle-income parents. The current maximum is \$2,632 per child.

The Liberals have promised to raise it to \$3,240 over three years. The New Democrats would boost it to \$4,900 over the same period. The Conservatives have said nothing about the child benefit, but have offered all parents, rich and poor, a tax deduction of \$2,000 per child. The Bloc would introduce a new refundable child tax credit worth \$3,730.

In a minority government, the New Democrats might be able to get the Liberals to increase the benefit faster or stop the Conservatives from dismantling it. The Bloc might be able to induce the Liberals to be more generous or persuade the Conservatives to target their tax relief to low-income families.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

Affordable preschool care has the double benefit of allowing low-income mothers to work and ensuring that their children are ready to learn when they start school.

The Liberals have promised to invest \$5 billion over five years in a universally accessible early learning and child care program. The New Democrats are proposing a similar program. The Bloc Quebecois, whose provincial confreres launched Quebec's \$5-a-day child care program (the fee is now \$7) thinks Ottawa should cost-share provincial initiatives. The Conservatives do not support subsidized child care.

The New Democrats would not let a minority Liberal government walk away from its child-care commitments (as the party has done in the past). The Bloc would reinforce the Liberal interest in promoting Quebec-style daycare. In the event of a Conservative minority, the best either party could do is persuade Stephen Harper to let the provinces to use their federal transfer payments for preschool care.

To sum up, the NDP would act as a spur to the Liberals and a restraining influence on the Conservatives. The Bloc Quebecois, despite its opposition to federalism, would pull either party in a mildly progressive direction.

The 1.1 million children who live in poverty don't have much bargaining power in this election. But those who are willing to stand up for them do.

In a close election, a vote of conscience can shift a nation's priorities.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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