

Harper keeps his mouth shut on children's issues [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In this environment, serious conservative parties simply cannot shy away from values questions. Values are increasingly the really big issues.

Late Friday, Campaign 2000, the cross-Canada coalition to end child poverty, posted a comparative chart on its Web site. The grid documents the platforms of the five major parties — including the Greens — on a basket of social issues, including income security (specifically the child tax benefit), early childhood education and affordable housing.

Campaign 2000, you may recall, echoes the 14-year-old House of Commons resolution to "seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." All these years later and we have more than one million children, or very nearly one child in six, living in poverty. (Some will argue this statistic and assert that the true number is more like one in nine. That's not exactly a salve, is it?)

In their election platform, the Conservatives have pledged to introduce a \$2,000 child tax deduction. The party has made no commitment to the existing child tax benefit, which under the current government is scheduled to rise to \$3,240 by 2007. The NDP proposes to keep the child tax benefit, pumping up the maximum benefit to \$4,900. (The NDP additionally pledges the removal of the goods and services tax for what are deemed "family essentials"; while the Conservatives aim to increase the size of the GST credit by 25 per cent.)

Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator for Campaign 2000, says roughly 85 per cent of Canadian families currently receive some aspect of the child tax benefit, which diminishes as family incomes rise. Conversely, says Rothman, the Conservative platform signals a shifting of the greater benefit to families less in need.

If the Conservatives would put one of the country's most important social programs at risk, what else might they do?

Early childhood education. On this the Conservatives have made no commitments.

The Liberals have pledged \$5 billion over five years for an early learning and child-care program, with affordable day care a key piece of the plan. The NDP wants \$5.2 billion spent over four years. The Greens envision a national child-care strategy, including non-profit day-care centres.

The Conservatives silence.

Affordable housing The Liberals propose an additional \$1.5 billion over five years. The NDP wants \$2 billion spent annually for 30,000 units a year. The Greens favour financial assistance to spur the creation of non-profit housing.

The Conservatives silence. "We have nothing from the Conservatives," says Rothman. "Not even the comment that the market will do it all."

As a nation, we have made shamefully slow progress on these issues. The Liberals pre-election inertia on child care makes that point.

Pedro Barata, the Ontario co-ordinator for Campaign 2000, recalls that it was Ed Broadbent's last day in Parliament, Nov. 24, 1989, when all parties resolved to eradicate child poverty. Too soon, the slamming recession of 1991 shifted national priorities to deficit reduction. "The ship started to turn around toward the new millennium," says Barata, with at least a belief that structural remedies to social cancers could be seized.

We know that federal-provincial bickering has impeded progress. And that Paul Martin has been slow to reassert that children are at the forefront of the national agenda.

But we also know that four of the five parties in this election are talking up the issue.

Tuesday's question for Stephen Harper: if our greatest social investment is not our children, then what?

- reprinted from Toronto Star

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