

Now if only he'd said that sooner [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Under the guise of an election platform, Paul Martin is scrambling to make up for his lost first 100 days in power.

If only the main social policy planks of the Liberal platform released yesterday had found their way into his first throne and budget speeches, he might not have emerged from the initial leg of the election campaign looking like the most expendable prime minister in more than a decade.

Back then, Martin's commitments on health and child care would have made for an activist start to a new social policy era.

He could have gone to Canadians armed with the beginning of a bold promising record as Prime Minister.

That is particularly the case of the policy that Martin described yesterday as the signature announcement of his platform: the commitment to a national child-care program.

Some of us have raised children from birth to adulthood on broken Tory and Liberal promises of such a program.

On the scale of recycled election commitments, the promise of action on child care ranks second only to a handful of phantom highways.

Canadians have only Martin's word that this time will be different. But at least, in contrast with previous federal proposals, the Liberal plan hinges almost exclusively on federal political will.

Martin's offer to the provinces to create 250,000 new child-care places over five years would come with no strings attached other than the obligation to oversee a universally accessible and affordable quality day-care system.

The model is Quebec's groundbreaking \$7-a-day program.

Cash-strapped provinces would not even have to match federal dollars to access the \$5 billion fund, although Martin clearly hopes they would eventually do so.

If the program proved as popular elsewhere as it has in Quebec, provincial governments would likely find it in their political interest to get involved sooner rather than later.

But if they did not, the Liberals say they would be prepared to have the federal government shoulder the seeding costs of a new national child-care program on its own.

Yesterday, Liberal strategists denied that the pressing need to differentiate themselves from the surging Conservatives had led them to strive to put together a more activist social policy.

The child-care plan had been in the works from the day Martin was sworn in, they said, as was the commitment to a more substantial reinvestment in health care than was envisioned in the recent budget.

If that is the case, it is hard to understand why the Liberals would have passed on every pre-election occasion to highlight Martin's social vision and drape it with the legitimacy of government policy.

Be that as it may, they are clearly hoping that yesterday's platform - released 48 hours before Conservative Leader Stephen Harper unveils his own program - will be different enough to drive home their message that the election is about more than seizing an easy occasion to punish a three-term government.

The social chapters of the platform are meant to contrast with the Conservative tax cuts.

If there is a trap for the Tories in the Liberal platform, it ultimately lies in its pricing.

With a platform that bears a \$27-billion-over-five-years price tag, the Liberals are hoping to beat the Tories on fiscal prudence.

Despite the successive billion-dollar announcements of the past few weeks, they say they have set aside a third of the federal government's projected surpluses to pay for unforeseen new priorities.

The calculation is that Harper will emerge as more of a free-spender than Martin when he tallies up his commitments.

By the weekend, with the release of the Conservative plan, the battle of the platform numbers will be fully engaged.

Regardless of its outcome though, a more competitive than expected election campaign is already reaping benefits for voters as leaders are forced to show how the dots of their rhetoric connect into policies.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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