

Martin needs to become a champion for children [CA]^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Nov 2003

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Paul Martin, our next prime minister, is both an activist and an internationalist. These two characteristics create the opportunity to do something that's good for Canada and good for the developing world. This is to make Canada a leading nation for early childhood development and use this expertise and experience to help developing countries improve the quality of their future populations. Canada could become the global champion for children.

There are good economic arguments for doing this, because early childhood education today is about the quality of the adult population tomorrow.

David Dodge, governor of the Bank of Canada, argued in a speech to the Sparrow Lake Alliance annual meeting in May that the biggest payoff from investments in human capital will come from early childhood development.

James Heckman of the University of Chicago, a winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, has made much the same point, showing that investment in early years development is the most profitable one that can be made. When infants and children get off to the right start, they are much more likely to enter the school system ready to learn and much more likely to proceed to college or university.

Fraser Mustard, the founding president of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, is Canada's most passionate advocate for early childhood development. He co-authored with Margaret McCain a major study on early years development for the Ontario government, a study that has been distributed to all corners of the world.

Canada has made a tiny start in early childhood development, but has failed to deliver on promises that were made. At their conference in September, 2000, Canada's first ministers, representing federal and provincial governments, made a strong commitment "to the well-being of children by setting out their vision of early childhood development as an investment in the future of Canada," as they put it in their communiqué, adding that "Canada's future social vitality and economic prosperity depend on the opportunities that are provided to children today."

But our provincial governments, after these bold words, failed to deliver.

Martin should get this high up on the next agenda when the first ministers meet him as prime minister, and he should keep the issue on the agenda of every subsequent first ministers' conference.

But early childhood development should also become a key priority of Canada's foreign aid agency, the Canadian International Development Agency. Here, Martin should appoint one of his most talented MPs as minister to drive the initiative through a bureaucratic CIDA.

By combining a concerted effort at home with a foreign policy initiative abroad, perhaps working with the Scandinavian nations that are currently ahead of Canada in actual implementation, a Martin government could accomplish something extraordinarily useful for Canada and the world. This is one way we can build Canadian identity and positive Canadian pride in what we offer the world.

- reprinted from Toronto Star

Region: Canada^[2]

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