

Social-spending cuts won't be necessary, PM-in-waiting says [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Paul Martin said yesterday that cuts to social spending are not needed and the federal government can still create new programs in areas such as early childhood development, despite tight public finances.

As he entered a meeting where Liberal MPs were to pitch their proposals for new social policies, Mr. Martin insisted that shrinking surpluses do not rule out new programs.

"I believe that we can be very imaginative and show a lot of innovation in terms of the way in which we approach our social programs, and we can meet the needs of Canadians and we can do it on a basis that is affordable -- provided that we set out priorities," he said outside a meeting of the Liberal caucus that he convened to discuss social policy.

Last month, Mr. Martin delivered an economic speech in which he called for lower taxes and reduction of the national debt - just after outgoing Prime Minister Jean Chrétien called for a big boost in social spending.

Mr. Martin said there are important social issues that must be tackled, citing early childhood development and disabilities as examples. But he has also identified other social priorities -- including better health care, improved quality of life for aboriginals and a new fiscal deal for cities -- and suggested all could be done within a balanced budget.

Toronto MP John Godfrey, the chair of the Liberals' social-policy caucus and the sponsor of last night's meeting, is leading a push for an "integrated" early childhood development program -- a form of subsidized care for preschool-age children.

He said that programs such as Quebec's \$5-a-day daycare program create their own social and economic spin-off benefits, reducing the vulnerability of poor and some middle-class children, reducing the drag on other social-program costs, and allowing parents to take jobs and pay taxes.

But he admits it would be a costly "investment" in the initial phase at least, and that a Martin government might have to spread out its social-program plan over the life of its mandate, rather than the next budget.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

Region: Canada ^[2]

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