

Liberals, take note - it's not about babysitting [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hold your breath, Canada is trembling on the brink of the single most important advance it could make toward a rich, stable, productive and dynamic future. This week, and next week, and the next, Canada's future as a sophisticated democracy hangs in the balance.

Behind closed doors, federal and provincial bureaucrats are battling over details and dollars. The results of all their palaver will bob to the surface next month when Finance Minister John Manley presents the federal budget.

And don't laugh when I tell you what it's all about.

It's about the way we nurture our children and the way we care for and educate our preschoolers.

I've never understood why Canadians are so shamefully backward when it comes to understanding the power and urgency of early childhood learning. Europeans have known about it and acted on it for decades. The European Union stresses that countries should pour 1 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product into early childhood care and education; some European countries exceed that amount.

They know that stable, affectionate, stimulating and enriching care for children from age 2 to 6 is the surest way to deepen and steady a country's culture, embrace and integrate newcomers, and bring up happy, co-operative and bright children.

Canada? A pathetic joke. While countries like Spain, Italy and Portugal spent the '90s bringing themselves ever-closer to the gold standard set by the Scandinavian countries, Canada frittered away its boom years in stupid inter-provincial bickering and the dismantling of the federal government's capacity to lead and to govern.

If we're luckier than we deserve, the federal government may be about to reassert its leadership.

The Throne Speech repeated the promises made by every prime minister of the last 20 years, including Brian Mulroney that it would at last provide the structure for a national child-care plan.

This time, the promise is backed by a powerful push from the Liberal back benches. Gratifyingly, the Liberal caucus issued a report two months ago demanding a national child care strategy and spelling out the essential principles high quality, universal access, non-profit, community accountability, serious federal funding, targets and timelines based on best practices.

Now Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart is pushing the momentum forward and getting tough with the neanderthal provinces like Ontario, who grabbed nearly \$300 million in federal "early childhood development" money in the past couple of years and ferreted it away somewhere. Not one cent was spent on child care. A great deal was wasted on leaflets and "resource centres," and \$115 million of it was not spent and was unaccounted for by this most reckless and incompetent of provincial governments.

This time, if the stars are right and the feds hold firm, the money won't be wasted because it will be tied to specific programs.

Please understand this is not mere babysitting we're talking about, and it's not "help for poor families." It is a country-wide approach to educating the young, all the young, and doing it far better than we've ever done before.

I've just plowed through an immense document in which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) studied in depth the early childhood systems of 12 member countries. It could make you weep with frustration to see what countries like Belgium, Finland, France and others have provided to create a strong start for all their children

Universal child care, almost free to all parents, whether or not they are poor, whether or not the mothers are working. National policies to ensure that the care is of high quality. A profound understanding that "care" and "education" for preschoolers are inextricably entwined.

In fact, any alert Canadian mother could have told the politicians that, if they had ever been willing to listen. From the moment of birth, every child is learning, every minute of his or her waking hours. The hours, weeks and months of a toddler's life are irreplaceably precious learning times.

One reason we've never had this well-established education system for small children in Canada is that the media have done a pretty good job of disinformation and mischievous propaganda. Every time the demand for a universal child care program has risen, the media have

instantly created an artificial debate between stay-home mothers and working mothers," as though unearned privilege were going to be given to some women and not others. Divide and conquer. And drag a stinking red herring across the trail while you're at it. Early childhood education was never about babysitting or "undermining the family." Its true impact is to support good parenting, create community, ensure the peak well-being (intellectually, emotionally, socially) of every child and, incidentally, free up the earning power of mothers.

The Europeans have been on to this for ages, but no one in government here would listen, at least not until Dr. Fraser Mustard, with his medical credentials, started talking about the new cognitive science of infant learning as the basis for later achievement.

The Ontario Tories - the most child-hating government since Victorian times - co-opted Mustard's lingo about "early years" learning to make it appear that they were doing something for the kiddies. Meanwhile, they ruthlessly cut \$80 million from well-regulated, non-profit day care in Toronto.

In any case, the Tories seem to have outfoxed themselves. By using Mustard's "early learning" vocabulary, instead of talking about "day care," they inadvertently alerted the wider public to what was truly at stake.

Good quality child care is education. The Tories waste \$43 million a year on their controversial standardized testing in the schools. But the real foundation for learning, as the OECD study established beyond a doubt, happens in the preschool years.

Watch for crucial signals in the federal budget. If it insists the provinces use the money only for universal, non-profit, high quality, accountable child care, and if it allots enough money, increasing year by year for a long-term commitment to building a solid infrastructure, we can begin to hope that our country and our children are on the path to a bright future.

And if it doesn't, give up on the federal Liberals.

-Reprinted from the Toronto Star

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