

Will Tories change course on child care? [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Urquart, Ian

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EXCERPTS:

IN THE SPRING of 1999, Margaret McCain was quietly hopeful when Premier Mike Harris endorsed the report on early childhood development that she and Fraser Mustard had co-authored.

At the time, McCain dismissed the cynics who opined that Harris' apparent support for her recommendations for a major government investment in child care was just a pre-election manoeuvre to slap a patina of compassion on his hard-edged government.

Now, three years later, McCain is sadly disillusioned as she has seen Harris' endorsement morph into something called "Ontario's Promise," a hollow public relations exercise that does little for children.

When I asked McCain this week if Ontario's Promise is a fraud, she replied: "Fraud is a strong word" and then offered her own substitute: "Useless endeavour."

McCain has produced another report - this one co-authored by Charles Coffey - for the City of Toronto. Released this week, the report pummels the Ontario government for failing to live up to its commitments on child care and for misspending federal transfers.

In the fall of 2000, as part of a broader federal-provincial agreement on social spending, Ottawa promised the provinces \$2.2 billion over five years for early childhood development. The expectation was that at least some of the money would go toward expansion of licensed day care.

But, says the McCain-Coffey report, Queen's Park spent its first allotment of federal cash (\$114 million) on "anything but child care." A large portion - \$30 million - went toward something called "early years centres," which the report labels as nothing more than "information kiosks."

These criticisms come not from your usual suspects - leftist critics with a knee-jerk reaction against everything the Conservative government does. Far from it.

McCain, a former lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick, is one of the frozen-french-fry McCains. Coffey is executive vice-president of the Royal Bank of Canada. The two of them are hoping to put pressure on government to get back into subsidizing child care so that the supply can catch up with demand.

In their first term, the Conservatives cut back their own spending on subsidized child care and shifted greater responsibility for it onto the municipalities, which could not afford to expand the supply.

At the same time, the Tories introduced "workfare," which had the effect of increasing demand by requiring single parents on welfare either to get into some kind of employment or to take a training course.

Then, in the government's second term, Harris gave responsibility for child care to John Baird, a neo-conservative ideologue and a bachelor. He was, by most reports, indifferent, if not hostile, to subsidized child care. "There was a very basic difference in philosophy," says McCain, who had a frustrating meeting with Baird. "He saw child care as a parental responsibility, not a social responsibility."

(For the record, Baird denies that he is philosophically opposed to subsidized child care but acknowledges that he favoured putting the money toward other priorities, such as autism.)

The result of all this, in Toronto at least, is a child-care system under "severe pressure," according to the McCain-Coffey report, with a wait list estimated at 16,000.

McCain and Coffey are not asking for anything as revolutionary as universal child care. They just want a commitment from the government to put at least a portion of the next instalment of federal cash - \$153 million is due this year - toward its intended goal: subsidized child care.

And they are hopeful that the new premier, Ernie Eves, will at least have an open mind on the issue.

In naming his cabinet, Eves got off to a promising start by demoting Baird to the lowly post of government whip and giving responsibility

for child care to Brenda Elliott, a mother of four.

But the early signals from Elliott are not positive. Asked about the McCain-Coffey report in question period on Monday by NDP critic Shelley Martel, Elliott responded with the same sort of bureaucratic gobbledegook that Baird used to resort to. "We have continued and, in fact, increased our investments in child care," she said, "but this money has been directed to particular priorities of our government."

Pressed by Martel, Elliott grudgingly agreed to "consider" the request for more money for subsidized child care, but she made it sound unlikely.

Either Elliott hasn't caught up with the change in tone in the government under Eves (she's not alone in this respect), or McCain and Coffey have their work cut out for them convincing the Tories that child care is important.

The first signal could come in the budget in a couple of weeks.

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