

Cracks show in Chrétien's armour [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada's enduring Olympic medal drought should give Prime Minister Jean Chrétien yet another reason to pause before he calls a fall election.

While Chrétien is rumoured to be contemplating an early vote to pre-empt a potential souring of both the economy and the public's mood, he might find Canadians crankier than he expects this fall.

Without overstating the link between the Olympics in Australia and the political games here at home, Canada's lacklustre performance on the medal front hardly amounts to the kind of conditioning Liberal strategists would have hoped for.

The sounds of the disappointment of young Canadian athletes that are now echoing daily from Sydney are a pretty poor stage-setter for a campaign that Chrétien says he would like to run as a celebration of his government's achievements.

The sense that the cream of this country's youth no longer measure up to the rest of the world is disquieting enough to amount to an early crack in the Prime Minister's feel-good election armour.

As it happens, it is not an isolated crack.

Another is a major report on the state of child care in Canada, which paints a desolate picture of a modern nation whose children are warehoused rather than nurtured while their parents struggle on the work market to make ends meet.

Yet another crack is statistics that show that, on average, Canadian cancer patients have a lower life expectancy than those similarly afflicted in the United States.

It was not so long ago - less than a decade, surely - when measuring Canada's health-care system on the scale of the U.S. was the way to compensate for all the other less advantageous differences, starting with colder winters and including higher taxes.

Canada, as it was thought then, might not win as much Olympic gold as its richer neighbour, but overall, it took better care of its own.

While some of the gaps in the country's social fabric were already showing when the last federal election took place in 1997, it was widely understood they were part and parcel of the just-won fight on the deficit.

But with the federal government bragging about three consecutive budget surpluses, voters may be tempted to ask why Chrétien has waited so close to an election to start fixing the damage.

Voters might want to know why it is only next year that extra federal money will find its way back into the health system, and why the funds will have no blueprint for action attached on such fronts as pharmacare and homecare.

Looking at the dismal Canadian day-care performance, they might wonder why it is that Quebec and British Columbia, both of whom have introduced innovative day-care programs that have allowed them to do better than other provinces, are not being showcased by the federal government as trail-blazers, in the same way that Saskatchewan was in the early days of medicare.

Upon announcing his retirement from politics on Monday, Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow was reluctant to list balancing his province's books as an achievement.

That reluctance was not inspired by modesty. Rather, as Romanow pointed out, eliminating the deficit is not an end, but rather a means to more and better choices to enhance the common good.

In the face of mediocre developments at the Olympics and in social policy, the bulging federal budget surplus which Chrétien would so like to put forward as a symbol of his success might take on a less flattering meaning.

It might come to be seen by voters as a sign of his government's complacency.

A footnote: Political strategists have long tried to forecast the impact of patriotic surges on the political climate. Thus, on the eve of the 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown accord, federal strategists put much hope on the Blue Jays winning that year's World Series. With

the decisive game being played on the eve of the vote, the thinking was that if the Jays won, the feel-good mood would spill over to the ballot box.

As it turned out, they had it only half-right. The Blue Jays did win and their victory did do wonders for the self-esteem of Canadians. So much so that the next day, voters sent the Charlottetown accord and most of the country's political establishment packing, in part on the confident presumption that Canada could do better.

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