

Harper's strange victory ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada was a fairly grim place before the Conservatives came to power, Stephen Harper informed us in his weekend speech celebrating five years as prime minister.

Among the litany of troubles in those days before Conservatives brought light to a darkened land, Harper said on Sunday, was that "parents were disrespected, really thought more likely to spend money on beer and popcorn than take care of their children."

Harper was referring to the previous Liberal government's plan to introduce a national child-care program, implying it showed Liberals didn't trust parents to spend money on caring for their children.

It's worth pausing for a moment to marvel at how Harper has managed for five years to get away with this sort of ludicrous, misleading, deceptive statement. Rather than showing disrespect for parents, a government child-care program - like the ones common in Europe and Quebec - is the only way to provide millions of Canadian parents access to decent child care.

By setting up a public program paid for through taxes, we can bring down costs and ensure high quality, thereby providing a vital service for people unable to afford it privately. In canceling the child-care program upon taking office and replacing it with a \$100-a-month payment to parents of young children, Harper was throwing a tasty bone to conservatives who believe a woman's place is in the home.

But he risked alienating the vast majority of Canadians who no longer live in the Father Knows Best patriarchal world of the 1950s. Today, 73 per cent of Canadian mothers of young children work outside the home and need child care, but \$100 a month won't cover it.

The fact that early childhood education programs have also been shown to benefit children enormously - and that Canada ranks last in spending in this area among developed nations - created a powerful case that would have allowed opposition leaders to seize the high ground and push Harper onto the defensive.

Instead, they largely abandoned the issue and allowed Harper to proceed as if he had a mandate to push rightward, even though post-election polling showed the Conservative victory was due to voter anger over Liberal corruption.

With a meek and often cooperative opposition, Harper went on to introduce policies out of sync with values held by most Canadians.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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Tags: child development ^[3]

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infant/toddler ^[5]

mother's labour force participation ^[6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8165> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/mothers-labour-force-participation>