

Eulogy becomes rallying cry for the left ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It will probably be a while before a Canadian prime minister again offers a state funeral to someone on the left.

Of course, there aren't many political leaders of any stripe who could pull at the country's collective heartstrings quite the way Jack Layton did, especially with his stunning political achievement snatched so cruelly from him before he even got to locate all the bathrooms at Stornoway.

Allowing Layton a state funeral was probably Stephen Harper's most generous prime ministerial act. But it led to a nationally televised scene that will likely haunt him and surely inspire progressives for years to come: Stephen Lewis, the iconic elder statesman of Canada's social democratic movement, standing in front of Canada's most right-wing prime minister ever, speaking truth to power.

Determined that the event be more than just a tribute to the goodness of one man, Lewis used the heft of the occasion, as Layton would have wanted, to drive home Layton's social democratic vision for the country.

With the Conservatives' new hammerlock on power - accomplished with a mere 40 per cent of the national vote - here at least was one joyous moment in which we could watch the country's most powerful orator confront a prime minister who had no choice but to stand every time the rest of the room rose in rapturous pleasure at Lewis's inspiring call for a more equal and generous Canada.

That message is exactly what those on the right have been trying to deny - that there is an alternative to the grim, slash-and-burn policies of austerity they want to foist on us, making this an ever more unequal society.

To cite just one example, an award-winning Toronto nursery school, Bond Child and Family Development, which has served poor and special-needs children in Regent Park since 1937, will soon close due to lack of funding.

Does this make any sense? Could there be anything more self-defeating for us as a society than to deny a chance for the most vulnerable preschoolers to overcome the enormous obstacles already in their path?

Research overwhelmingly suggests that early childhood education leads to improved academic performance, higher adult productivity and better social functioning. The World Bank calls it a "cost-effective means" of ensuring all members of society "live up to their full potential."

Yet one of Harper's first acts upon taking power in 2006 was cancelling the fledgling early childhood education program finally put in place by the Liberals. The savings now help finance the Conservatives' expanded prison program, which may prove necessary as neglected kids from the Harper era reach adolescence.

Allowing that Regent Park nursery school to close for lack of funding only makes sense if we take the position we can no longer afford to educate all children in our society.

That, by the way, is an ideological position, not a statement of economic realities. The economic reality is that we get richer every year as a country; our GDP has grown massively since 1937.

Yet, as Lewis noted, we now have "an economy that excludes so many from our collective wealth."

It's not that we don't have enough collective wealth - our cup overfloweth - it's that we've accepted a rigid and illogical ideology, preached by conservatives, that teaches us we can no longer afford what we plainly managed to afford when we had less money.

The events of the past week remind us that the social democratic vision remains potent in the land.

Harper, who once dissed Canada as "second-tier socialistic country," desperately wants to replace that vision with a different national vision - one based on military fighting power, loyalty to the British crown and an economic system where the strongest survive while the rest (even in nursery school) are on their own.

The well-financed Conservative machine appears increasingly dominant at all levels of government in Canada. Still, Lewis's masterful eulogy was a stirring reminder that Canada's social democratic forces may be on the ropes but - like Layton brandishing his cane - are not willing to go gentle into that good night.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: economics ^[3]

poverty ^[4]

federalism ^[5]

demographics ^[6]

demand ^[7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/08/eulogy-becomes-rallying-cry-left> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demographics> [7]

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