

Mr. Polievre, you're no Santa Claus.... ^[1]

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I'm often stunned by some of the things the Harper Conservatives say and the claims they make-ordinarily not with much savoir-faire but often with impunity. For example, MP Wei Young's remarks that with their anti-terrorist bill (C-51), they're acting "in the same vein" as Jesus Christ or MP Costas Menegakis' analysis of women wearing niquabs "I think for the citizenship ceremony, someone needs to identify themselves. We need to know who they are". Or one of my all-time faves from front bencher Tony Clement: "Statisticians can ensure validity with larger sample size [1]". There are lots of others.

But one of Pierre Polievre's limitless communications selling the Universal Child Care Benefit ("One more sleep until Christmas in July for Moms and Dads!") to Canadians really takes the breath away for sheer chutzpah (aka unmitigated gall). It put me in mind of the iconic comment made by Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen to Republican Senator Dan Quayle (who kept comparing himself to John F. Kennedy and is also famous for thinking that potato is spelled potatoe) in a 1988 US Vice Presidential debate: "I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy".

Now I don't actually know Santa Claus, though if I did he would be-I'd like to think-a friend. But Pierre Polievre is by no stretch of anyone's imagination, a Santa Claus of any stripe, form or cultural origin.

For starters, the gifts Santa bestows on children at Christmas (in December, not a month before a summer federal election call), are produced by him and his elves in his workshop at the North Pole. As I hope all Canadians know, the whopping UCCB cheques that the so-beneficent Cons are bestowing on families this week, while manufactured by Santa-Polievre and his elves, are made possible because the federal government has collected up taxes from all Canadians and put money aside partly by cutting many valuable social (think national child care program), environmental (think national parks, Experimental Lakes Area research), social justice initiatives and programs (think Kelowna Accord), and so on.

Second, I like to think that Santa tries to make sound, wise choices when deciding what to bestow. Think about the idea of "making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice", and those proverbial lumps of coal in the stocking. With Pierre and the PM though, no amount of evidence or advice even from their own people such as the Parliamentary Budget Officer have convinced them that the Universal Child Care Benefit is not child care and as a cash payment/child benefit, it's badly constructed.

That is, there are heaps of evidence that to provide the "choice in child care" the UCCB is purported to deliver, the best, most efficacious approach is to fund a system of high quality affordable services to allow parents to actually choose what they want and need. One has only to look around at which countries do this (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, Italy, etc) and what parents get, and which countries don't (the US, the UK and Australia) and their families' problems that continue not to be solved. And as far as child benefits are concerned, most experts agree that a well-designed child benefit should be part of the full family policy package that many modern enlightened countries provide. But sending a one-size-fits-all taxable cheque to every family with a child 0-5 no matter what their income or need is-as many have pointed out-a very poor design no matter what you call it.

So once the dust has settled on all the taxpayer-funded UCCB advertising and Polievre's laugh-out-loud remarks about this week's windfall UCCB cheque have faded, maybe the real debate about what a 21st century government of Canada should do to really help young families can begin in earnest.

While many young families will undoubtedly be happy to receive in their UCCB cheques, they will, I suspect, make a much smarter analysis than the "Gee thanks, Santa" that Pierre Polievre and the Conservatives are hoping for.

[1] This is completely incorrect statistically-a basic in Stats 101.

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