

The rise of the Santa state ^[1]

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Source: Ottawa Citizen

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Jul 2015

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

If you believe the Conservatives, the options in child care policy are limited to either the nanny state or the Santa state.

It is that latter approach that the government has adopted, with social development minister Pierre Poilievre declaring on the weekend that it was “One more sleep until Christmas in July for Moms and Dads!”

Conservatives in this country once believed that public money belonged to the public, and that only socialists regarded redistribution programs as presents for the state to dispose at whim.

This increase in the child benefit is Canadians’ money, not the government’s money and certainly not the Conservative Party of Canada’s money, despite Poilievre’s decision to launch the benefit wearing a CPC-emblazoned shirt.

Not only are we Canadians paying for the government to give some of us some of our money back (and then tax it), we are also paying to be told about it incessantly because the government is apparently very concerned that some parents might not collect. Conservative MPs, following the prime minister’s instruction to tout the increased benefit, are obediently telling people to tweet the prime minister to let him know — personally! — that their money arrived safe and sound. Thanks, Santa!

Back in 1997, when Stephen Harper was the vice president of the National Citizens Coalition, he was more sanguine about the idea that some government cheques might not be delivered. “I would think if you were living on EI and you didn’t get the cheque, you’d make a strong effort to find it,” Harper said.

But now, he believes it is the government’s job to send ministers across the country — and into social media and even on cheesy YouTube videos at public expense — to make sure every entitled beneficiary gets the money. A cynic might suggest he wants voters to see an image of a smiling minister handing out benefits (maybe even in a CPC shirt) before the election. A more charitable theory: The prime minister is concerned about incomplete distribution of his government’s benefits because, unlike EI recipients, many of the child-benefit recipients aren’t actually hard up for cash and so might not make that “strong effort to find it.” There is no income threshold for this ostensibly conservative program that takes money from some taxpayers and gives it to others. As long as you have a kid, it’s like being on the Oprah show: You get a cheque and you get a cheque...

In 1997, Harper wrote an essay with Tom Flanagan in the Citizen, declaring as a core tenet of conservatism the belief that “asking the state to care for one’s own family does not constitute social responsibility.” Somehow, in the nearly two decades since, that conservative principle has evolved into telling us all to ask the state for stocking stuffers instead.

-reprinted from Ottawa Citizen

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