

With a feminist prime minister, can feminist policy be far behind?

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With the House of Commons back in session, the three-month-old Trudeau government gets to demonstrate its priorities. So far the government has been a study in ambiguities.

Speaking in Davos, the prime minister made himself clear on one important point: he is a feminist. You can watch him say it in the top video of the 2016 World Economic Forum.

In a panel discussion on pay equity, he underlined how feminism was not just something for women. Men and boys should not be afraid to say they were feminists, said Justin Trudeau.

The prime minister explained he had learned as much from his wife Sophie Grégoire in discussions about how to raise their own family of two boys and a girl.

As a self-declared feminist, Justin Trudeau must now be ready to accept challenges from the women's movement. Does he recognize how women are short-changed in the Canadian economy, for example, and not just by being underpaid?

Canada trails other advanced industrialized countries in public spending on early childhood education. The Liberals promised a national early learning program in their 2016 election platform. With feminists at 24 Sussex Drive, this should be a done deal.

Child-care advocates such as Martha Friendly have been pointing out that Canada is holding back participation by women in the labour market through inadequate provision of public child-care spaces.

The Liberals opposed the idea of Canada-wide child care in the 2015 election as it was proposed by the NDP, but supported it in their election platform. Does Trudeau as feminist accept that his government listen to women who want the federal government to facilitate access to child care, and ensure every province gets a program similar to the much-admired Quebec program?

For the women's movement, generous funding for an anti-poverty strategy has been a top priority. The work of Jean Swanson as an anti-poverty activist is a fine illustration. Like many others across Canada, she has been battling for affordable housing and increases in welfare rates, against governments reluctant to acknowledge their own failures and responsibilities for poverty. How quickly does the feminist PM plan to spend the \$20 billion promised for social infrastructure and how will this spending raise the social assistance minimum?

In Davos, Trudeau declared he favoured the Energy East pipeline project that would carry diluted bitumen from Alberta to New Brunswick for export to world markets. He qualified his support by pointing out that the TransCanada project needed approval by the National Energy Board, and that his government had to be assured the construction project met strict environmental standards.

In opposition, the Liberals were unhappy with the National Energy Board, and found fault with existing mechanisms for environmental assessment of pipeline projects.

Economist Robyn Allan has been researching pipeline projects and has identified a series of problems with the National Energy Board. Feminist policy analysis suggests that regulatory bodies need to meet democratic tests. Are they transparent and open? The NEB does not measure up.

Private planning by corporations proudly puts profit ahead of human needs. From a neoliberal, market-friendly perspective, government decision-making needs to be ruled out, because by definition the public sector is inefficient.

Feminist analysis of public policy suggest otherwise. Spending decisions need democratic input. Such policy options as slowing bitumen extraction, refining it in Alberta, restricting production to meet domestic needs alone, all require active government intervention to curtail corporate power.

Government regulation and other measures up to and including government ownership make sense when building a democratic society where needs of women are taken seriously.

Feminist public policy analysis is historical and empirical. It rejects the price system as the organizing principle for society. A feminist perspective integrates social and political dimensions with economic factors.

Mr. Trudeau and his gender parity cabinet could use some input from Marjorie Cohen and Jane Pulkingham. Their book *Public Policy for Women* looks at the constraints placed on women by policies of the neoliberal era.

Reading this feminist analysis it is impossible to miss the downside of the policy staples of the last three decades: privatization, free trade deals, balanced budgets, de-regulation, cuts to social spending, withdrawal from funding co-op and social housing, continued workplace inequities, and attacks on unionization.

Clearly the embrace of neoliberal economics has produced growing inequalities, not the productivity gains promised at the outset of the markets-work, governments-fail policy formula dear to neoliberals.

As a feminist, Justin Trudeau should understand that markets fail. As prime minister, he should aim to feminize public policy.

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