

Justin Trudeau's true tests are still to come: Editorial ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada is back. So we have heard since Justin Trudeau was sworn in as prime minister on Nov. 4. But to what extent have the Liberals, in their first half-year in office, truly succeeded in undoing the dubious legacy of the previous government and pointing a better way forward?

Certainly the Liberals have rightly undone some of the most egregious policies of the Harper government — devising a more humane approach to refugees, reversing anti-labour laws, restoring the long-form census, dropping legal actions such as the defence of Harper's backwards approach to niqabs, and so on.

Trudeau has appropriately challenged balanced-budget orthodoxy, moving to address poverty, strengthen infrastructure and stimulate the economy. The government has earmarked wise investments for aboriginal health, justice and opportunity and promised a new, respectful relationship with First Nations — a good start to a long process. And Trudeau has shown leadership abroad, if not yet at home, on climate change.

Canadians can be forgiven for momentarily basking in Trudeau's light. It would be churlish not to celebrate this change for the better.

At the same time, we must not be blinded by these sunny ways to the challenges we face. As Trudeau embarks on the projects that will shape his legacy — the inquiry into murdered and missing aboriginal women, consultations on the trans-Pacific trade pact, electoral reform, a new health accord — we ought to bear in mind that sunnier is not enough.

We also need clarity and action on key issues where the government's direction remains unclear. Three are particularly important.

Anti-terror and crime policy: Even as the Supreme Court is dismantling, piece by piece, the Harper government's tough-on-crime agenda, the Liberals have quietly looked on, abdicating their leadership role. For an administration committed to evidence-based policy, the government has been strangely passive in the unmaking of Harper's blindly ideological crime policies.

Similarly, despite promises to undo the worst of the previous government's overreaching anti-terror law, C-51, we have seen no action. Here, again, Trudeau should not be content to leave it to the courts to overturn dubious provisions on, for instance, pre-emptive, warrantless arrests.

Toppling laws born of fear is always politically difficult, but as long as these policies remain in place, rights will be violated and people will suffer. These were mistakes of Parliament's making; they ought to be Parliament's to undo — and now.

National child care: As we have argued before, no single initiative would make such a big difference in the lives of Canadian families as universal, quality, affordable child care.

Yet, despite the Liberal government's promise to develop a "framework" within its first 100 days, no progress is evident some 180 days — and one budget — later.

This issue is urgent. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has ranked us dead last among peer nations for child care. Licenced spots exist for just 22 per cent of children under 5. And for parents trying to get their child into subsidized care, matters are even worse. In Toronto alone, almost 12,000 eligible children are in the queue. The government's generous new child benefit, while welcome, is not enough.

Pharmacare: Canada's existing hodgepodge of private drug plans and patchy public coverage puts far too many Canadians at risk. At any given time, thousands face aggravated illness and needless suffering because they can't afford the rising price of drugs.

There is no need for this. A recent University of British Columbia study found that not only would national pharmacare ensure that all Canadians have access to the drugs they need, it would also save billions of dollars. No wonder every other country with universal health care also covers the cost of prescription medicine. No wonder, too, that 90 per cent of Canadians support the idea, according to a recent Angus Reid poll.

So why has the Trudeau government been so conspicuously silent? As negotiations on a new intergovernmental health accord get underway, pharmacare should be a top priority.

There is no doubt that the Canada of today is a friendlier, more open and inclusive place than was the Canada of six months ago. But sunny ways don't mean much to those caught up in a justice and security system that damages rather than rehabilitates and threatens our privacy. To working parents who can find neither the money nor the space to ensure proper care for their children. Or to ailing Canadians unable to afford needed medicines.

The sunny ways are welcome, but the true tests of this government are yet to come.

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