

A social policy theorist faces the trade-off between what's possible and what's ideal ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jean-Yves Duclos wanted to be a voice for the concerns he was hearing, but ahead of the 2015 election he assumed he'd be back at Laval University by last fall.

"I thought I would rapidly return to the academic world," says the former professor of economics now styled as the federal minister of families, children and social development.

That was a reasonable analysis.

No Liberal had won the riding of Quebec since 1980, the last Liberal to try had finished fourth and Duclos was a novice politician who last had been a member of the Liberal party as a teenager.

But then the numbers went the economist's way: Duclos managing to win with a mere 29 per cent of the vote, the third-lowest share of any winner in last year's election, the NDP incumbent just 1,000 votes behind.

And with that, the chatter amongst Duclos's university colleagues, according to Stephen Gordon, a fellow economist at Laval, was about how neat it would be if the professor who had spent years studying social welfare and public policy, was put in charge of the department for employment and social development. (Note: Gordon donated to Duclos's campaign, but says he would do so regardless of which party Duclos was running for.)

The prime minister apparently felt likewise. And the result is perhaps something like a theoretical ideal for those who enthuse about evidence-based actions and expertise: A scholar of social policy put in charge of the federal government's agenda on poverty, affordable housing, employment insurance and the like.

So what happens when an economics professor gets a say on such things?

"In politics, there is very little time to think," says Duclos, whose Ph.D. thesis was entitled, "Progressivity, Equity and the Take-up of State Benefits, with Application to the 1985 British Tax and Benefit System."

"To have been able to think beforehand is a considerable gift."

An early vote of confidence

When the prime minister adjusted his cabinet last month, Duclos's mandate was expanded to include additional responsibilities for skills training and EI

Duclos, genial in person and so far mostly free of bombast when he speaks in the House of Commons, says he is conscious of what he might bring to the file and he thinks his academic experience is having an impact.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm not too critical around the cabinet table," he says. "And I have checked with a couple of my colleagues that I wasn't too critical and they have said, 'No, we need to be critical and to be critical is a good way of supporting each other.'"

He was motivated to pursue politics, he says, by concern for the state of political debate and discussion.

"This lack of scientific and social sensitivity was one of my biggest motivations for making the leap into active political life," he told the House during his maiden speech in April, referring to the previous government's decision to raise the age of eligibility for Old Age Security to 67.

In that case, he could refer to his own study to explain why that decision would hurt low-income seniors and women, as well as depleting provincial coffers.

The Liberal government has pledged to leave the age of eligibility at 65 and it has followed through on a commitment to implement a new child benefit, checking off the first two items on Duclos' mandate letter.

Now the tough part

The most interesting stuff remains: A national strategy on poverty reduction, action on child care, EI reform, new allowances for parental leave, new investments in affordable housing and a strategy on social finance.

(Though there has been some excitement of late about a guaranteed basic income, Duclos says the provinces are best situated to implement basic income policies.)

For now, the impact of existing anti-poverty policies is being studied in six cities across Canada and discussions have begun with the provinces on a framework for child care. On child care, Duclos suggests a targeted approach, rather than universal access.

"Given the limited resources that all governments, including the federal government, are able to invest, we want to make sure that those investments in early learning and child care will benefit most those families that need the support most," he says.

"The scientific literature says clearly that quality child care makes a big difference when it comes to children from lower-income families and children facing particular difficulties."

An economist who dreams of equity and efficiency

He talks about policy in terms of equity (how a policy is distributed) and efficiency (how it will impact society). The Canada Child Benefit should satisfy both goals. Some versions of a guaranteed income, Duclos argues, might only achieve the former – reducing poverty, but lowering labour market participation, savings or incentives to pursue education.

"A policy that is efficient and equitable is a great policy," Duclos says.

Of course, Duclos is not the sole arbiter of government action. He is one of 30 ministers, including a prime minister and finance minister who have their own advisers on economic and social policy. There are provincial and municipal governments he must work with. And somewhere here, there are the realities of democratic politics.

What's the trade-off?

Duclos says there is often a trade-off between what's possible and what's ideal.

"This morning around the cabinet table we had such an item where we wanted to be both coherent and flexible at the same time," Duclos says. "It wasn't possible. So we had to choose an option that sacrificed one of the two."

Of course, previous ministers, no matter what their background, had access to economists and expert analysis who could inform policy. But with someone like Duclos at the cabinet table, it might be all the more glaring if the Liberals move forward with policies that ditch sound economics for populism.

"He definitely knows many of the facts, theories, and evidence that link to his ministry and his responsibilities. But, speaking from experience, it is painful and frustrating to try to operationalize that in a political environment," says Lindsay Tedds, an economics professor at the University of Victoria who previously worked as an analyst in the federal public service, when asked whether those in the academic community are excited about Duclos' ascent.

"Any academic with a foot in the public policy world knows this, so we have no expectation that he will save the world or that he has the magic bullet for the issues of poverty, economic inequality [and the] social safety net. We just expect that he will bring a little more sophistication to the issues."

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