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Round 3 in fight for child care

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Ken Dryden has learned the lessons of history well.

A national child-care system has to be built with imperfect bits and pieces. Otherwise, it will not be built at all.

"My biggest fear is that in the months ahead, the little fights will distract us and de-energize us from the big fight: the fight to create a national early learning and child-care system," the social development minister told 650 child-care advocates on the weekend.

"In this country, at this particular stage, child care is provided in all kinds of different ways. There may be lots of things wrong that you want to make right, but chances are most of them don't really matter that much in the bigger scheme.

"I am an old goalie," Dryden reminded his audience. "Goalies and brain surgeons are supposed to be perfectionists. Maybe I once was. Now I think it's better to be willing to get closer and closer to an answer, to learn to get things right."

If his plea for tolerance prevails, Canada can finally start moving toward a national network of affordable pre-school learning centres.

If it fails, the child-care debate will remain stuck where it has been for the last 20 years: somewhere between yes and neverland.

Three prime ministers — Brian Mulroney, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin — have promised Canadians a national child-care program. Two didn't deliver.

But contrary to popular mythology, they were not entirely to blame. The provinces threw up roadblocks. The Senate sat on its hands. And the child-care lobby pecked one attempt to death.

Mulroney was quite sincere in 1984 when he promised "a comprehensive, affordable, accessible child-care program."

He wanted to make it part of his legacy. He wanted to show female voters that the Conservative party was modern, committed to women's equality and capable of converting Liberal pipe dreams into reality.

It took his government delay-ridden years to come up with its program. It featured \$6.4 billion in new federal funding. Its aim was to create 200,000 child-care spaces. Ottawa pledged to pay 75 per cent of the capital costs of new non-profit facilities.

Mulroney called the plan "the most important social innovation of the 1980s."

It was almost universally panned. Child-care advocates dismissed it as too little, too late. The provinces complained that Ottawa's cash didn't match its objectives. Social activists protested the inclusion of commercial daycare centres. The opposition parties called it grossly inadequate.

The Canada Child Care Act died on the floor of the Senate, when the 1988 election was called.

Women's groups rejoiced. The bill had been an abomination, they agreed. Canada was better off without it.

Chrétien was more cautious. In his 1993 election platform, he pledged to create 50,000 new child-care spaces a year, provided the provinces put up half the money.

Prolonged negotiations ensued. By the time Ottawa produced its first cash instalment, federal-provincial relations had soured to the point that none of the premiers wanted to participate in the shared-cost program. Ontarians, meanwhile, had elected a provincial government that was ideologically opposed to institutionalized child care.

Chrétien tried to make amends in his second term, committing \$935 million to child care over five years. But by that time, the provinces were all going off in different directions. Ontario, still in the grip of the Mike Harris/Ernie Eves government, refused to put a cent into child care.

Now Round 3 begins.

Martin has pledged to spend \$5 billion over five years laying the foundation for a national system of early learning and child care. It will be built on four principles: child care facilities must be regulated, educational, open to all children and affordable to parents of all means.

What he has not done is rule out privately-run facilities; require conformity across the country; or insist that small communities meet the same standards as large urban centres.

Again, there are grumbles from child-care advocates. Ottawa is not spending enough, they say, not showing enough leadership and not setting the bar high enough. "The system must support the best, not accommodate the worst," said Marcel Lauzière, president of the Canadian Council on Social Development.

Dryden got an earful of such advice at last weekend's national child-care conference in Winnipeg.

He listened politely, acknowledged that \$5 billion is a modest down payment on a national pre-school system and agreed that the current patchwork of child-care arrangements leaves much to be desired.

Then he made his pitch. "By trying to get things perfect now, all we do is disappoint ourselves, discourage ourselves, rob ourselves of the energy and excitement we need to take on the task.

"We need to accept difference. We need to work with difference. We will fail if we don't."

History bears him out. If child-care advocates are wise, they will heed the minister's message.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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