

CHILDREN.... TOP POLITICAL PRIORITY?

By Steve Kerstetter

Many British Columbians were surprised by Premier Gordon Campbell's year-end claim that helping children is his top political priority.

This is, after all, hard to reconcile with the fact that BC's child poverty rate has remained the highest in the country for the past five years, while long-standing policy recommendations to address this issue have been largely ignored.

The test of the Premier's claim came out this past week, with a Speech from the Throne and a Budget Speech that contained little for children and their parents, at a time when the number of vulnerable children and families is growing. Plans for expanded all day kindergarten were shelved and no commitment was made to a poverty reduction plan.

Perhaps part of the problem is the way the Premier defines what helping children means. Here's what he said to the Canadian Press in an interview published in late December:

"First of all, literally all of what I've tried to do in public life is about children. We just don't give it that name. When I say let's balance our budget, that's about children. That's about not laying off costs into the future for our kids to pay that they will get no benefit from."

The critical flaw in this statement is that it does absolutely nothing for the children who are in need today, rather than the children who will grow up to become taxpayers 20 or 25 years from now.

The Premier also said, "I think it's healthy that people are saying you could do better."

We can do better and there are numerous policy changes that would reduce the risks facing BC's children. There has been no increase in the minimum wage since 2001; we have welfare policies that have devastated families and individuals, social housing that excludes too many poor families, and a child care policy that quickly got run off the road after the federal government reneged on its negotiated commitment with the province. The funding formula for public schools has resulted in reduced supports for children with special needs, and BC has refused to follow the lead of other provinces and enact anti-poverty legislation with a timetable for reducing poverty.

Unfortunately, policy changes that would truly help today's vulnerable children were missing from the plans announced by the Finance Minister this past week. The government talked about a Canadian "wood first" policy, carbon-sequestration technology, making it easier for other Canadians to work in BC, and an "open skies" summit. They may all be worthwhile projects, but they certainly don't reflect the Premier's claim that children are his top political priority.

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