

**THE TRUE NORTH STRONG AND FREE
AN EVALUATION OF THE HARPER CONSERVATIVE
GOVERNMENT POLITICAL PLATFORM**

2008



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INTRODUCTION

The political platform of the Conservative government was issued just a few days prior to the election. It is a paean to Stephen Harper. His photo is on almost every page. Sometimes he is smiling, sometimes serious, always earnest. What is more, to make the message of leadership clear, the sub-title of the report is “Stephen Harper’s plan for Canadians”. Reference to the Conservative government is consistently prefixed by his name. In case we still do not get the point, we are reminded at the very beginning of the report that we are better off with Harper. He is our man (not our government) to keep Canada strong and free, to guide our country through a period of global instability, and to keep us united. He is proclaimed as the man who will make our communities safe by cracking down on crime, imposing stiffer penalties on young offenders, and who will avoid “risky tax-and-spend experiments that will drive up the cost of everything from groceries to gas and throw Canada back into a deficit.”

In terms of social policy, the platform, unlike the adulation of Harper, is more modest. Aside from the controversial introduction of tougher sentences on young offenders, the platform offers more of the same sort of initiatives that were introduced in the 2006, 2007, and 2008 Conservative budgets. For the disabled, for example, the new government will introduce income-splitting for caregivers and improve the Disability Savings Plan. For seniors, it will increase the age credit amount and provide more funding for the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers. For families, it will expand the Registered Education Savings Plan and fully index (for inflation) the Universal Child Care Benefit. For the environment, it will introduce a cap-and-trade system (rather than a tax on carbon). To protect communities, it will replace the automatic release of criminals (after they have served two-thirds of a sentence) with earned parole and get tough on organized crime and gangs. With respect to cost-shared programs, it will limit federal spending in areas of provincial and territorial responsibility. In short, it will continue to follow the path it has pursued over the past few years. We should expect no surprises.

In the following pages, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) evaluates the Harper Conservative government political platform with reference to social policy principles approved by the CASW Board in 2003 (Appendix 1). These principles are based, in turn, on the Codes of Ethics of CASW and IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers), both of which place a high priority on human rights and social justice.

DISABILITY

Many of the social policy initiatives are based on earlier programs or strategies introduced by the Conservatives. The idea of income-splitting for caregivers of family members with disabilities comes from the introduction of income-splitting for seniors. The program for seniors enables a spouse paying higher tax to split a proportion of his or her income with the lower-income earner in the household, thus lowering the overall tax burden. The same privilege will be extended to a family with a member or members who are disabled and a spouse who is not working full-time in order to be a caregiver. In addition, where one of the spouses dies and has accumulated savings through a Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP) or a Registered Retirement Income Fund (RRIF), the government proposes to allow the savings to be rolled over on a tax-deferred basis into a Disability Savings Plan. The savings plan was introduced by the Conservatives in 2007, with the main purpose of encouraging parents and guardians of disabled children to set aside funds in order to ensure their financial security after the parents retire or are no longer able to support them. The plan allows contributions by anyone up to a lifetime maximum of \$200,000 and until the beneficiary reaches the age of 59. Contributions are not tax-deductible, but returns on investments from the funds will accumulate tax free. This aspect of the plan will benefit families with a disabled member where a deceased spouse has accumulated retirement savings.

The main difficulty with these measures, as with earlier measures for the disabled introduced by the Conservatives, is their regressive nature. They benefit families with middle and higher incomes more than low-income families. The major uptake will be by middle- and high-income families who can afford to contribute. Another concern is that the plan continues to individualize assistance to persons with disabilities and relies on tax measures to solve issues that require a comprehensive range of income and disability supports. It does not tackle the problem of poverty among persons with disabilities in a serious manner.

FAMILIES

There are similar incremental measures for families. A tax credit up to \$5,000 will be offered to first-time homebuyers. In addition, the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), which assists some low-income families to renovate their homes, will be renewed, and the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) will be extended for two years. The Registered Education Savings Plan will be extended to charities to allow them to partner with low-income families to take advantage of the plan. As noted above, the Universal Child Care Benefit will also

be fully indexed to ensure that the value of the benefit does not erode over time. In addition, the government will make the benefit tax free for sole-support, single-income parents caring for children under six.

All of these are welcome measures. Some, such as the HPS, the RRAP, and the extension of a tax-free benefit to sole-support parents, will benefit low-income families. Others, however, will disproportionately benefit middle- and high income families. As we noted in an evaluation of the 2006 Conservative budget, there are advantages and disadvantages to the Conservative child-care benefit from the perspective of CASW social policy principles. On the plus side, the policy initiative respects the right of parents to make their own choices with respect to child support, although the actual support for child care is quite limited. Furthermore, it is consistent with the CASW equality principle, since it is non-discriminatory, and with the constitutional integrity principle, since transfer payments to individuals fall within the jurisdictional responsibility of the federal government.

In light of the equity principle, however, the Conservative initiative has two flaws. The first is that different families with the same income will end up with different after-tax benefits. The benefit will be taxed in the hands of the lower-earning parent in the case of couples and a (usually higher) tax rate of the single earner in the case of one-parent families. While these disadvantages will be offset, to some extent, for sole-support parents, they will continue for other low-income families. The proposed measure to offset the disadvantage of the Registered Education Savings Plan by allowing charities to partner with low-income families acknowledges the problem, but the measure is unlikely to assist many families.

SENIORS

Benefits to seniors will be in two forms. The first is an increase in the age credit amount of \$1,000, on top of previously planned increases. The age credit is a non-refundable income tax credit for seniors with income below \$32,000. It is helpful for some modest- and low-income seniors, but does nothing for those who pay no income tax. The second initiative is an increase in funding for the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers, established by the Harper government in 2006. The funding is intended for training and labour adjustment, not income support, and targets unemployed workers in single-industry communities. It is an important initiative but modest. It does not satisfy the comprehensive principle of CASW as it does not apply to the majority of unemployed workers in Canada.

ENVIRONMENT

The environmental initiatives are essentially a re-affirmation of policies or programs previously introduced by the Conservatives. These include an allocation of \$1.5 billion over the next seven years for the production of biofuels as well as additional funds, over four years, for wind, solar, and geothermal power. The government will also work with the provinces to assure that bulk water will not be exported under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Following up on its plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in absolute terms, the government plans to develop a cap-and-trade system to cut pollution by 20 per cent over 2006 levels by 2020. In addition, the government will introduce a new Environmental Enforcement Act to consolidate enforcement and penalty provisions in existing legislation. Most of the initiatives do not require new money, and therefore there is no budget for additional funds. The only extra budgeted cost is for enforcement (approximately \$15 million).

In reality, as we have also noted in earlier evaluations, the Conservative commitments are insufficient to address climate change in a serious manner. They do not provide funds or policies for a “massive scale-up of effort” suggested by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development in the Office of the Auditor General. They do little to shift taxation from carbon to non-carbon production and consumption. They fail to establish adequate pricing mechanisms to deal with greenhouse gas pollution, take measures to conserve Canada’s biodiversity, or invest in a comprehensive, sustainable strategy to protect and enhance the Great Lakes basin. The unwillingness of the Harper government to move the environmental agenda along a path to sustainability in a manner that recognizes the urgency of the problem remains a major weakness. In relation to CASW policy principles, the policies are not comprehensive. They do not follow best practices, and they are disingenuous with respect to social dialogue.

SECURITY

Being tough on crime remains a strong commitment of the Harper government. It will replace the young offenders’ law to focus on deterrence and responsibility. Young offenders convicted of serious crimes will face more severe sentences. For adult offenders, automatic release from prison after serving two-thirds of a sentence will be replaced by earned parole. Serious crimes such as robbery, arson, home invasion, and impaired driving will not be eligible for house arrest. The “faint hope” clause will be repealed so that prisoners with serious crimes cannot seek early release. Any murder committed in a gang-related context will be deemed first-degree murder, and there will be mandatory prison sentences for

persons convicted of drive-by shootings. There will also be mandatory prison sentences for impaired driving causing bodily harm or death and serious drug crimes such as trafficking and running large cannabis grow operations.

While many of these initiatives have considerable emotional appeal with the Canadian public, their efficacy, unfortunately, is uncertain. During the election campaign, there was considerable reaction to the proposed toughening of the young offenders' law by social workers and others, particularly in Quebec, where alternative rehabilitation measures have been introduced that have been associated with a decrease in juvenile crime. Similarly, among adult offenders, it seems that many of the tougher sanctions being proposed mimic similar initiatives that have been implemented in the United States, but have not been accompanied by a significant decrease in crime. Furthermore, in Canada, the crime rate is down. Hence, it is difficult to recognize the urgency which the Harper government attaches to tougher crime legislation.

From the perspective of CASW social policy principles, there is not much to add to comments in earlier evaluations of Conservative budgets and statements. There is little evidence that the government is listening or consulting Canadians about the relative emphasis that should be given to the prevention of crime rather than fighting it. Also, there is almost no discussion about the need for comprehensive rehabilitation services once individuals are incarcerated. Presently, rehabilitation and educational services are very unevenly provided in correctional institutions across Canada. Hence, offenders sometimes leave federal and provincial institutions without substantive support to aid them in integrating into society when they are released. Getting tough on crime is unlikely to be effective if it is not accompanied by a comprehensive range of services to enable individuals to adapt or change their behaviour.

FEDERAL SPENDING POWERS

One final measure that is likely to have a profound, albeit indirect, impact on social policy is a proposal to limit the federal spending power. A Harper government will ensure that any new cost-shared program in an area of provincial or territorial responsibility will not proceed without the approval of the majority of provinces. In addition, provinces will be given the right to opt out of a federal program with compensation provided they offer similar programs with similar accountability structures. Like other measures mentioned in the platform, the commitment to limit the federal spending power in areas of provincial and territorial responsibility is a re-affirmation of previous policy.

Then, as now, CASW has been supportive of such initiatives on the basis of the subsidiarity principle, which states that social programs are to be provided at the lowest level of community provision possible unless it can be shown that they can be more effectively provided by higher levels of government. It is also consistent with the principle of constitutional integrity, which states that social programs are to be financed, regulated, and provided with full regard to the jurisdictional responsibility and competence of each level of government. Under the Canadian constitution, health, social, and educational services are the responsibility of provincial governments. Income security, on the other hand, can be addressed through federal or provincial initiatives, and both levels of government have played direct roles. They are likely to do so in the future.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable thing about the Harper government is consistency between principle and practice. Harper is in favour of tax cuts for middle- and higher-income families. We get them. He wants more law enforcement. We are bombarded by proposals. He promotes a reduction in the size of the federal government and reduces revenue to make that goal a reality. He proposes to limit the federal spending power and establishes conditions for funding future cost-shared programs which make that goal likely. He is dubious about the merits of environmental sustainability. Then, he inaugurates policies that make it difficult for Canada to move in that direction in the immediate future. Similarly, he gives little weight to the need to reduce poverty and eschews any programs that make it possible.

What, then, can we conclude about the Harper government's social policy electoral platform? Can we expect more than in the past? Will there be a change of heart? Probably not! There is very little evidence that many of the social programs about which social workers are concerned are also a concern of the Harper government. There is nothing of substance in the platform about improvements in public pensions or unemployment insurance. There is no talk of child-care spaces. There is no apparent interest in the poverty of women or children. There is a perception that the federal government has already done its part to settle the health care problems of the country, except for additional funding for more medical personnel. There is no concern about the increasing concentration of income and wealth in the hands a small percentage of the population. Instead, there is a commitment to get tough on criminals and aberrant youth, many of whom come from the least advantaged in society. Furthermore,

rather than focus on the prevention and rehabilitation of criminality, which require government to address underlying conditions, the Harper government plans to protect Canadians through more mandatory sentences and indefinite imprisonment. These and other initiatives outlined above diverge from the policy direction advocated by most social workers to promote a just society.

APPENDIX 1

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS SOCIAL POLICY PRINCIPLES

(Approved by the CASW Board March, 2003)

Dignity and Respect: Each individual has a right to self-fulfillment to the extent that the right does not encroach on the rights of others. To that end, social policy measures should intrude as little as possible on the choices which individuals make to realize their own personal life goals.

Equality: Because of the intrinsic worth of every human being, each person shall be treated equally without unfair discrimination on the basis of disability, colour, social class, race, religion, language, political beliefs, sex or sexual orientation.

Equity: Individuals and families are to be treated equally if they are in like circumstances; social inequalities are considered just only if they result in compensating benefits for the least advantaged in society.

Comprehensiveness: All persons in Canada are entitled to educational, health and social services and social security on uniform terms and conditions in a manner which assures a range of choice and maximizes respect for the individual.

Quality Services: Services are to be based on best practices and a participatory approach to their administration and improvement.

Constitutional Integrity: Social programs are to be financed, regulated, and provided with full regard to the jurisdictional responsibility and competence of each level of government.

Subsidiarity: Social programs are to be provided at the lowest level of community provision possible unless it can be shown that they can be more effectively provided by higher levels of government.

Social Dialogue: Governments should take all necessary steps to encourage and facilitate extensive consultation with relative social partners in the development of social policies and the administration of social programs.

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