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Canada's Children in the Throne Speech and Budget

Children comprise about 25% of the population, but there is no one in the federal government with a specific mandate to represent their interests in the development of the upcoming throne speech and budget. Issues that affect children (persons under the age of 18) fall within the policy domain of small units in several federal departments, and no one in cabinet has a mandate to focus on their best interests. In addition, issues affecting children often fall through the cracks between federal and provincial jurisdictions in Canada. Young people cannot vote; they have no way to hold the government accountable for how decisions affect children in Canada.

Young people should be a priority in the next throne speech and budget. To prepare for a time when there are fewer workers and more seniors, which has been named a priority, we need to focus more attention on our children. Investing in the full development and protection of all Canada's children is one of the best ways to ensure that there will be a strong, healthy population and a well-educated workforce in the decades ahead. The reality is that Canada's infant mortality rate is rising, and child poverty and injury rates stagnate above those in many other affluent countries. Maximum development of the potential of every children is one of the core principles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Canada is committed to implement.

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) offers the following suggestions as practical ways that the throne speech and budget could contribute to developing the potential of all children in Canada:

1. Equitable treatment for all children in Canada's national income support programs

Under the current Universal Child Care Benefit program, introduced in 2006, some children in poor families receive less, after taxes, than children in wealthy families. And under the current Child Tax Credit, introduced in 2007, children in the poorest families receive no benefit compared to children in affluent families, who receive \$300. The introduction of these policies happened at a time when 12.4% of children lived in poverty, and the wealthiest 10% of households with children had ten times as many resources as the poorest 10%. In addition, the child benefit program has become so complicated that many families do not know if they are being treated fairly or not.

In November, the Chief Public Health Officer identified child poverty and the income gap between children in Canada as a major public health issue, in *The 2009 Report on the State of Public Health in Canada*, entitled *Growing Up Well: Priorities for a Healthy Future*. The report cites research to show that 80% of 27 identified factors in child development improve when family income improves.

The solution is a fair and understandable system of support for families that ensures all children have the opportunity for a good start in life, as well as a national poverty reduction strategy. The next budget could make a substantive difference for the most vulnerable children in Canada by ensuring that poor children are not discriminated against in any of the federal income support programs and increasing the level of support for children growing up in poverty.

2. Invest in Early Childhood Development

Canada currently invests much less in early childhood education and childcare than other industrialized countries, and has no quality standards of care for all children. Numerous reports document the high return on investment in quality early childhood development for both the current economy and sustainable development.

For too long, ideological debates about whether mothers should be employed or stay at home have diverted attention from the real-life needs of Canada's children. The reality is that the majority of Canada's young children spend a large amount of time in care outside the home. Public policy has not accounted for this change in childhood in Canada, nor the emerging knowledge from neuroscience and genetics about the importance of the first years of life in all aspects of one's development and potential. There is research evidence and experience in other countries to show that applying what we know about good conditions for healthy child development through early childhood development programmes with minimum quality standards is in the best interests of children and societies.

This throne speech and budget should include a national strategy for early childhood development with minimum quality standards.

3. Close the Gap between Aboriginal Children and Non-Aboriginal Children

As a first step, the Prime Minister could use the throne speech to announce that the government will move immediately to resolve the outstanding claim on behalf of Aboriginal children for equal treatment to Non-Aboriginal children in child welfare services. This is a matter of discrimination that the Auditor General brought to the government's attention in 2008. Resolving the substance of the complaint would end the current use of tax dollars to pay for a lengthy, adversarial process at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. The government, which has a responsibility to protect the rights of children, should give priority to the best interests of the children involved, children who are in critical need of assistance to develop their full potential as Canadians.

The budget could also include an investment strategy to close the well-documented gap between the educational opportunities and health services available for many Aboriginal children, relative to most children in Canada.

4. Best Interests of the Child and Youth Justice

In the Omar Khadr decision, the Supreme Court confirmed that the "best interests of the child" is a matter of fundamental justice: children are not adults and are not to be treated in the same way as adults in the justice system. This has implications for all areas of youth justice in Canada.

The throne speech could commit to ensuring that the principle of the "best interests of the child" will be explicitly stated as a primary consideration in all proposed reforms of the youth justice

system, and that implementation of that principle will be consistent with international guidelines and good practices in the field of youth justice.

5. National Children's Commissioner

Developing the full potential of all Canada's children is an essential component of a strategy to deal with the challenges of an aging population and a changing society. We can no longer afford to let matters that affect children fall between the cracks of many departments and all levels of government who make decisions that affect children, without careful consideration of the impacts on them.

The throne speech should announce the government's intention to establish a National Children's Commissioner to be the missing voice for children's concerns at the federal government level. A private member's bill to establish a National Children's Commissioner, introduced by MP Marc Garneau in the last session of parliament, could be re-introduced as government legislation. It could then be referred to a parliamentary committee to consider the details of the mandate and appointment process, to ensure that the office will be an independent advocate for children's rights in Canada.

For further information:

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