

Viewpoints Submission

Alberta Views

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Martha and Henry are the fictional names given to “ordinary Albertans” by Premier Ralph Klein. A group of feminists in southern Alberta started Martha’s Monthly in June 2004 as a way to take back the name and revel in their ordinariness as they comment on public policy in Alberta .

Cheryl Mahaffy’s piece, *Daycare Debates*, (February 2006 edition) was right on the money for this old Martha. But Ms. Mahaffy wrote her piece before the January 23rd federal election that saw Stephen Harper elected Prime Minister. Marthas all over Alberta should be worried. The Alberta government has long espoused the idea, as Ms Mahaffy pointed out, that childcare is an individual commodity arranged for by individual buyers and sellers. Now we have a federal government that appears to agree. There is growing concern that Mr. Harper’s government will not honor the recent agreements made between provinces and the federal government in regards to childcare and will contribute to the commodification of childcare by offering monthly payments to families to make “choices” about childcare.

In Mr. Harper’s first news conference after his election he reiterated his commitment to scrap the provincial agreements on childcare after one year and introduce his party’s \$100 a month payment to families with children under six. Harper stated, “Well, I think that the child-care program we laid out in particular, direct assistance to all Canadian parents. I think this is something that is very popular.” Martha had to chuckle because she had just read the results of the election and while Mr. Harper thinks his plan was “very popular”, his government only got 36.3% of the popular vote. But Martha’s chuckles were replaced with a growing anxiety as she realized what Harper’s plan would mean to all us ordinary Marthas and Henrys.

In a federal election forum held in Lethbridge, one Martha asked her MP, Conservative Risk Casson, if providing \$100 a month to each family with children under 6 wasn't a lot like providing each driver with a small sum and asking them to pave the road. The analogy is a good one. Governments have long provided services like roads and education because the cost and chaos of having individuals try to arrange these were too high. At one time in the past, individuals contracted the services of the local doctor directly. Sometimes this meant people could not afford to pay so they went without care. Sometimes it meant that doctors were paid in chickens and eggs. The introduction of a single pay system alleviated both the doctor and patient from the discomfort and disarray of arranging care when care is needed. It is the same with childcare. Parents should not have to settle for the care they can afford. And childcare providers should be secure in the knowledge that their salary will include more than a chicken and some eggs.

While Ms. Mahaffy did a fine job of pointing out the desirability of having a public response to children's development through the provision of a quality, affordable, universal, and accessible system of care, she was not able to explain why it is that Alberta Progressive Conservatives and the federal Conservatives see such a strong desirability in the opposite. Another article in the February issue begins to point to the real issues. Neil Parmar's piece *Whose Family?*, rightly calls the Alberta government's policies on the family "rhetoric" and "platitudes".

At the heart of the problem in Alberta is a government seized by neo-liberalism and the cult of the individual. In the neo-liberal dictionary, *family* is the group of individuals that have to be bankrupted to pay for the health care, childcare, and education costs of their members. Individuals become, then, responsible for their "choices" and dependent on their families to help pay for those choices. People who have children, according to such logic, must pay for the care of those children, much as a stamp collector is expected to pay the costs of the supplies he purchases. Parents and philatelists must pay for their hobby choices. But parenting is not a hobby, nor an individual pursuit. And childcare is the concern of every citizen, parents or not. Childcare must be seen, along with health care, education, and other social services, as the responsibility of all of us to see that none of us falls behind.

While we could debate the \$100 amount and find that it falls far short of the actual cost of quality childcare, the underlying message is what we must challenge. Both Mr. Harper and Mr. Klein need to have their neo-liberal roots exposed and debated. As "ordinary Albertans" we Marthas and Henrys need to speak out in favour of a society that cares for its young, old, weak, and ill. Otherwise you all better stock up on chickens and paving machines.

Lisa Lambert is the founding editor of Martha's Monthly. Visit www.womanspace.ca for more information.