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Ottawa *Watch* 189: Family, household politicanomics

By Lloyd Mackey

For Edna and I, the 2008 campaign theme for the minority-governing Conservatives, was predictive if not prophetic. If we had chosen to retire in that year, rather than phasing down during our early to mid-70s, we would have been in trouble, financially. Christian newspapering was not particularly prospering and we depended on Edna's successive careers in teaching and executive assistancy for the retirement "floor" we needed.

Wise counsel was helpful and we found that working about seven years beyond normal retirement age saved us from an poverty-riven elderage. That we both had very satisfying working situations in Ottawa for those years made the situation not only bearable but pleasurable. And good health care helped, too, given my heart issues.

All that to say that what Harper had to say at the commencing of the 2008 campaign had personal resonance for us.

It has been less than two weeks since Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in the rose garden at Rideau Hall – the governor-general's residence – and announced the October 14 election.

The other side of the equation is that it is still almost a month before the vote takes place. And, if 15 minutes in politics is a lifetime, then almost anything can happen on polling day, despite the best-laid plans of strategists from all parties.

During that rose garden media scrum, Harper suggested that he hoped, during the campaign, to talk about "our plans to preserve for seniors, the opportunity to live out their golden years with the financial security and health care they expect."

He also indicated reassurances about safe streets, secure borders and a united country.

But the mention of seniors (of which your humble scribe is one) could be instructive, because some friends have been communicating in recent weeks about concerns of seniors who may have been hurt by the now-seemingly-distant decision to tax income trusts.

Was Harper's reference to financial security for seniors meant to be a hint of possible help – direct or indirect – for seniors who might get hurt from either the income trust decision or other past present or future economic tremors?

From this vantage point, the answer lies in the approach to economic issues being taken by the prime minister. That approach is causing the leaders of the other four parties to

adjust their previous emphases on the environment as an issue, to a blended accenting on family and economic matters.

Both the family-friendly “sweater-vest” advertising in the Conservative campaign and the subsequent Liberal spots on Stephane Dion helped to set the stage. Particularly, for the Tory leader, there was a need to try to shift the image from “tough guy” to “nice guy”

Even Harper’s sitting down at a piano in Halifax to demonstrate his now-rusty Toronto Conservatory-acquired classical keyboard skills helped to burnish that image. As it happened, it also gave him opportunity to build some bridges into the cultural communities, some of whose leaders are miffed at proposed changes in arts funding formulae.

But, long before the election campaign began, reporters were being encouraged to watch for the family-friendly approach, one that could appeal to both social and economic aficionados from the centre and right segments of the political spectrum. And the subliminal message in that approach seemed to be that ideology would give way to flexibility.

(The Tories seem to be counting on the fact that support for left wing economic and social proposals will be split between the Liberals, Greens and NDP, as well as, in Quebec, the Bloc.)

Added to all this is economist Harper’s continued reference to “households” in his economic comments. This reference is drawn, of course, from basic microeconomic theory, but it resonates well at the moment, with a family-friendly approach. In an economic environment, “households” and “firms” interact with each other. And, in a moderately-conservative world view, the roles of government, financial institutions and the international markets sketch themselves into the background, rather than tightly controlling those basic interactions.

So there is no talk about abortion, same-sex marriage or – conversely – state-controlled day care or other items which could soon serve up considerable political radioactivity. Rather, the various releases and announcements, so far, enable social and fiscal conservatives to nestle their own approaches into the broader family-friendly picture.

Undoubtedly, the campaign, so far, has been impacted in some measure by the emergence of Sarah Palin as the Republican vice-presidential hopeful. She has brought renewed attention to the idea of families where both parents work and, at the same time, raise more than the oft-lauded 2.2 children. And, to boot, the importance of union membership and activity is seen as a plus, rather than a minus, because such activity, in its finest form, enhances the household in its interaction with the firm.

So where do the seniors fit into all this?

An October 10 story in the *Globe and Mail*, written by Tu Thanh Ha and Virginia Galt, is entitled *More Canadians delaying retirement, study finds: Trend in line with changes in labour-market demand, analyst says*.

The story is based on data from last year's census, confirming that "growing numbers of Canadian workers are actually postponing their retirement plans."

The article pointed out that "in 1997, about 17 per cent of men between 65 and 69 were still working. In the (2007) census, that share has risen to 25 per cent."

Quoting Terence Yuen, a researcher with Toronto-based consulting firm Watson Wyatt, the article noted: "The survey was conducted at the peak of an economic boom, at a time when 'everybody has a job, the financial market is doing well and people might have less concern about retirement,'

"If the survey was conducted this year, the same respondents might be far more worried about their ability to afford a comfortable retirement. 'They might see that their mutual funds' value has declined significantly ... If you did it this year, when the market is really volatile and people are worried about where the economy is going, they might be more worried about the adequacy of their retirement.'"

That may well be why we might expect some discussion during this campaign, about financial security for seniors. And don't be surprised if announcements tie in both to health care and income security.

Readers who have been following *OttawaWatch* for the past three years will be aware that the health care afforded by the Canadian system, not the least of which was the contribution of the Ottawa Heart Institute, has given this particular journalist a new lease on working life.

All of which causes me to be grateful to God, some very good cardiologists, a supportive spouse and an economic system that will permit me to do useful work as long as renewed health permits.

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