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OttawaWatch 13: Ken Dryden and the child care caper

By Lloyd Mackey

As the Liberal government of the day attempted to move toward a national child care system, hockey legend Ken Dryden and L'Arche homes founder Jean Vanier entered the picture. This analysis explored some of the facets of that discussion.

Ken Dryden's child care initiative will likely have extensive implications for Canada's faith communities.

Socially-conservative advocacy groups will work against the initiative, hinting that it is a Marxist conspiracy to enable the state to protect children from the influences of faith and family.

Their leftist counterparts will argue that a universal national child care system is essential to protect children from poverty, abuse and corporate greed.

And Ken Dryden, as minister of social development, will be the person caught in the middle. He was one of Paul Martin's successful "stars" in the 2004 federal election, winning the riding of York Centre for the Liberals.

Dryden was representative of the Liberals' frequent practice of recruiting, to politics, people who have made their names in other sectors of society. In his case, the sector was NHL hockey.

He was arguably one of hockey's best goalies when he was with the Montreal Canadiens in the 70s. For that and other game accomplishments, he is a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Dryden sat out the season in 1974-75 – not because of a strike or lockup, but in order to complete his law degree at McGill. Since then, he has successfully practiced law, written books about hockey and, from 1997 to the point of his election to parliament, served as president of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

His resume has one more item: he is a member of the board of the Vanier Institute of the Family.

The founding patrons of the Vanier Institute were Georges Vanier, who died in the 60s, while serving as governor-general, and his late wife, Pauline. The Vaniers had five children, the best known of whom is Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche homes.

The Vaniers were and are devout Roman Catholics who epitomize the traditional definition of family, but, in the name of Christ, take it somewhat beyond the bounds of that definition.

The Vanier Institute defines family as:

Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following:

- Physical maintenance and care of group members.
- Addition of new members through pro-creation or adoptions.
- Socialization of children.
- Social control of members.
- Production, consumption, distribution of goods and services.
- Affective nurturance – love.

Now this definition is broadly accepted in many Christian communities, although a close study of it in a contemporary context will reveal that there will be some discussion across the faith spectrum. That discussion could centre on whether original Vanier vision included families headed by conjugally-active same-sex couples.

There is no doubt, though, that Jean Vanier's L'Arche is widely supported across the Christian spectrum. That vision involves the placing together in the same home, adults who are mentally or physically "wounded" and an equal number who are not so "wounded", for their mutual care and support.

This philosophically, is where Ken Dryden comes from, as he takes on the task of developing a child care program that the present government views as part of its mandate.

And, while it is true that social conservatives and left wingers will argue over both the definition of the family and the role of the state in the care of children, there will be general consensus that governments, faith communities and family units can mutually benefit from working together in certain areas.

Dryden's first venture into this initiative has been to get the provinces onside, because jurisdictional questions will impact the viability of the program. He is a long way from getting agreement at this point, despite the fact that the feds are prepared to put a lot of dollars into child care.

Most of the provinces are insisting that they get the money without strings attached, so they can make their own decisions as to whether, for example, they can get the private sector into the equation. Conservative-leaning provincial governments, for example, will not favor a monolithic run-from-Ottawa program that looks, on the surface, like an excuse for the state to edge out the family as the major influence in the lives of children.

For Christians, particularly those for whom church and family are closely-related subjects, there is obvious opportunity to see that constructive input is available. In many communities, child care has been a church-family co-operative effort for years. Hundreds, maybe even a few thousand churches, make their facilities available for child care centres.

In some instances, the running of the centres is a church-sponsored activity. In others, the church rents out the facility to other operators. In either case, the church and its families have the opportunity to shape the quality and nature of the child care that is offered.

Christian leaders need to be well-acquainted with what Dryden and the Liberals want to do about child care. I would gently suggest that what happens with child care in Canada, could have as much or more impact than what happens if the same-sex marriage legislation passes.

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