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National children's commissioner needed

By BRIAN HOWE

WHAT BETTER day than National Child Day – Nov. 20, designated by Parliament in 1993 to commemorate the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – to reflect on Canada's progress in advancing the rights and well-being of children?

The good news is that Canada has made progress on several fronts. Legal reforms across the country to allow for open adoptions and to recognize the child's right to know his or her parents are but one example. The bad news is that when we compare Canada's overall progress to that of other developed countries, Canada's record is less than spectacular.

Our mediocrity was revealed in UNICEF's comparative study of child well-being in the world's richest countries, released earlier this year. Thankfully, Canada did not rank at the bottom. This distinction was given to the United States and the United Kingdom. But neither was Canada near the top. In the top tier were the Netherlands and the Nordic countries.

Canada was in the mediocre middle – a sluggish 12th out of 21 countries. We did well on the education front. Canada ranked second for reading, mathematical and scientific literacy among 15-year-olds. Where we faltered were in areas such as child health and safety, child poverty, teenage births, and child substance abuse.

Why is Canada not in the top tier of children's rights? It is instructive to look at what the top-tier countries have done – which Canada has not done.

One important thing that the Nordic countries have done is to establish children's ombudsmen (or children's commissioners). These are independent national offices that have the job of advocating for children's rights, investigating issues and making annual reports to government, and promoting the implementation of the convention.

It would be a mistake to think these offices are magic wands for children's rights. They do not cause progress. Rather, they reflect a political commitment to children's rights that has already developed. But this said, they do have important value in helping to grow the commitment by keeping children's issues on the political radar screen and by putting pressure on governments for improved performance.

The Nordic countries have the lowest rates of child poverty in the developed world and among the highest rates of investment in child care, family supports and early child intervention programs. This is not simply because of children's ombudsmen. But they do play a major role in building public support and political will for these measures.

A problem in Canada is that an issue such as child poverty gets raised only about once a year. Campaign 2000 releases its annual report card on child poverty, the issue gets hyped in the media for a day, and the matter gets dropped. A similar pattern occurs with the issues of child health and the child welfare system.

We can't expect children to keep these issues alive. Children obviously can't vote and they have little power. Child advocacy organizations do what they can. But without stable funding, large memberships and the ear of governments, it is hard for them to keep up the pressure. A commissioner or ombudsman

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would apply pressure on an ongoing basis.

The previous Liberal government considered the idea of a national children's commissioner in the late 1990s. But the idea was dropped. We can only speculate as to why, but a probable reason was fear that such an office would cause the federal government embarrassment, just as other independent offices have done in the past.

The idea has recently resurfaced in a report by the Senate's Human Rights Committee called Children: The Silenced Citizens. Among the committee's 24 recommendations was the call for a national children's commissioner, who would have the task of raising public awareness and promoting the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

That recommendation should be acted on. Fear of future embarrassment for mediocre performance should not be an issue. Such fear did not stop the Nordic governments. They realized that governments sometimes need a push in order to progress. The outcome has been the progress of the Nordic world into probably the world's most child-friendly and family-friendly societies.

A children's commissioner is not a magic bullet. The office would not suddenly lift Canada out of its mediocrity and into the top tier of children's rights. But by keeping children's issues alive and raising awareness, a children's commissioner would make a contribution to building a culture that is more demanding of high standards on children's rights.

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