

Paying attention

Paul Willcocks on B.C. politics and life.

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Big plans, good start for new children's rep

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is looking like a terrific hire as B.C.'s first representative for children and youth.

The office isn't open yet, but she made an impressive debut in an appearance before the new legislature committee on children and youth last week.

Turpel-Lafond, a highly regarded judge in Saskatchewan before she took the job, faces a big challenge. She's taken on most of the responsibilities foolishly abandoned by the Campbell government when it eliminated the Children's Commission and the Child and Family Advocate in their first term.

None of this work should be partisan. Providing support for scared little kids or struggling families isn't a left-right question; it's one of decency and pragmatism. The NDP did a lousy job of running the ministry and the Liberals have been as bad or worse. But down here almost everything is seen through a political lens.

Turpel-Lafond's pitch to the committee - while positive and upbeat - left any would-be partisans in a tough spot. Instead of a general briefing, she hit the ground running with a specific proposal for action within the next five months.

Turpel-Lafond asked MLAs on the committee to work with her on a plan for children and families that would look five to 10 years ahead.

The plan, built with the efforts of both parties, the ministries, First Nations agencies - Turpel-Lafond is aboriginal - and everyone else involved would set five to seven big goals that would be benchmarks for our overall progress.

The effort to reach those goals would cut across all ministries. And the representative, and the committee, would report on interim progress, looking at what was working and what wasn't and making sure government was learning from examples around the world.

That's not happening. The children and families ministry has performance goals, but they're short term, not very useful and changing.

Here's one example to show how the approach could work. In B.C., on any given day, about 9,000 children are in the government's care. For some, it's a brief experience before things get better back home; for about 40 per cent of them, it's

life.

We are pathetic parents for them. Adolescent boys in care, for example, are 14 times as likely to try and kill themselves as children who aren't in care. Sure, some have lots of problems - a history of poverty and neglect, physical and mental health issues. But many are just kids who never got a chance.

Today barely one-in-four children in care finishes high school. That means a life on the margins - poverty, poor health, welfare or minimum wage and an increased chance their children will end up in care too. (Girls in care are four times as likely to become pregnant as teenagers as their peers.)

For a decade, we've accepted our failure.

Turpel-Lafond's proposal might see high-school graduation as a benchmark for children in care, or more broadly even children whose families have been helped by the government. So a target might be 75-per-cent graduation rate within 10 years; 40 per cent within five years. The task would be to look at why they aren't graduating now; remove those barriers; and report publicly and frequently on progress.

It won't be hard to improve. For example, a ministry study found kids in continuing care had an average stay of six years and moved almost once a year during that period. That instability undermines their chance of success in school. More children in care have been sent to live on their own at 16, another factor that works against graduation.

Tackling those kinds of problems is neither costly nor complicated.

And of course, failing to act carries its own price, forever. Even those who don't accept the moral obligation to help children should see the financial argument for investing in children to save decades of future costs.

Turpel-Lafond has the independence to go ahead with the plan on her own.

But the move to enlist the committee is a good way to begin building support for the idea that this issue really transcends day-to-day politics.

For more than a decade politicians from all parties have talked putting aside their differences and putting children first.

Turpel-Lafond has found a quick, positive way to put those claims to the test.

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