

Oct. 29, 2004. 01:00 AM

Copps recall foggy, but she's not totally wrong

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The Sheila Copps-Paul Martin Canada Health Act dispute is intriguing. Copps says in a new book that Martin had intended in his 1995 budget to scrap the Canada Health Act as a sop to the provinces, which faced a 40 per cent cut to federal cash transfers. Martin denies this and those around him at the time back him up.

Senior finance officials are said to be baffled by Copps' claim. The only element in her story they can clearly recollect is that she was successful in having the name of the new federal transfer introduced in the 1995 budget changed from the Canada Social Transfer to the Canada Health and Social Transfer.

So what lies behind this story? Rather than being just a bit of budget trivia, the significance lies in an appraisal of Martin's actual views in 1995 about the direction social policy should take.

One thing that can be stated with certainty is that the 1995 budget speech did, in fact, refer to the new block transfer as the "Canada Social Transfer." Score one for Copps.

On the other hand, like the rest of us, perhaps Copps' memory is faulty. She admits she kept neither copies of early budget drafts nor notes of her conversations.

Yet, there might still be something to her recollections from that time. Perhaps her gut feeling actually concerns another move announced by Martin in that February, 1995 budget.

Indeed, Copps would be correct if she were recalling the federal government's abandonment of national standards in a major social policy area. She would be right that this happened and that it was a sop to the provinces, whose cash transfers were about to be cut dramatically.

But what she might have been thinking about in the '95 budget was the Canada Assistance Plan. CAP was the federal legislation that, from the mid-'60s until its repeal in the 1995 budget, required provinces to ensure that their social assistance programs respected national standards.

In order to qualify for federal funding under CAP, all provinces had to respect those standards, such as the requirement to provide assistance to all persons in need, regardless of the cause of need.

In the same way that the health act requires provinces to provide medically necessary services to all Canadians, CAP provided for a set of standards and a minimum social safety net in all parts of the country. Like the principles underlying the health act, CAP also enshrined internationally recognized social and economic rights.

During a time when the winds of popularity were still favourable for the poor, the federal government was clearly proud of its role in ensuring compliance with basic social rights.

In its 1989 annual report on CAP, the government stated: "By helping the provinces to help people in need, CAP ensures that the social safety net is available when it is needed. As such, it is one of the major cornerstones of the social security system in Canada."

Copps' memory of Martin's pre-budget abandonment of a "cornerstone" of Canadian social policy was right. However, it wasn't in the area of health but of social welfare that Martin was about to strip Canadians of basic rights protections.

As a U.N. panel that monitors Canada's compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted in 1998: "The Committee regrets that, by according virtually unfettered discretion in relation to social rights to provincial governments, the Government of Canada has created a situation (as a result of CAP's repeal) in which Covenant standards can be undermined and effective accountability has been radically reduced."

The repeal of CAP paved the way for a decade of provincial cuts and punitive legislative changes elected on welfare-bashing platforms.

Poor people know all about needing to live on inadequate social assistance rates, about the loss of key federal standards premised on the idea that no-one, adult or child, should be left to starve or freeze in the streets.

Copps was right when she recalled a great treachery by Martin in 1995, even if her recollection of the details may be foggy.

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