

Children and families face cruel cuts

VICTORIA

Number of B.C. children swallowed by snakes, zero. Number of children messed up or dead after time in government care, thousands.

And that makes efforts by the ministry of children and families to force a Kelowna family to give up a pet snake, including threats to apprehend their children, particularly bizarre. A child's risk of being swallowed by a snake in his living room pales with the risk of being lost within the ministry, bumped from foster home to foster home and ultimately dumped on the street at 16.

The Liberals were going to fix that back when they were in Opposition. They supported the independent watchdogs who reported that the ministry was failing to meet its own most basic standards. Gordon Campbell, as Opposition leader, called for more money for the ministry. He promised that the budget would be based on what was required to meet the needs of children and families.

But now the ministry faces budget cuts of 20 to 50 per cent. Instead of providing the needed money as promised, the Liberals have quietly started cutting \$58 million in support for the most vulnerable to head off a budget overrun this year. Foster parents have been told that the children in their care will no longer get money for extra tutoring or bus passes to allow them to go to counselling. No one is pretending that this is based on the best interests of children. It reflects the government's drive to save money, and it is the opposite to the needs-based budget the Liberals promised.

Imagine for a moment that you're 11, and you've been taken from your parents. You're in your third foster home

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in three years, you're struggling in school and a bit of an outcast, and you are often sad and lost. And now some men in suits, sitting in Victoria, have decided they won't pay \$20 a month for tutoring so you can succeed in class, feel a bit better about yourself and begin to think maybe life can work out.

How can we be so cruel and so stupid?

The cruelty is self-evident. So is the stupidity. Spend \$600 on tutoring to help a child succeed, and you have the chance to save 100 times that in the future. Spend \$60,000 on early intervention for an autistic child, and you can create an individual who will have an independent, successful life.

The Liberals used to agree, before the election. When parents of autistic children won a court battle to secure funding for treatment last year, the Liberals lauded the victory. When the New Democratic Party government announced plans to appeal, the Liberals were scathing.

"Shameful," said Lynn Stephens, now women's equality minister. "There should be a tremendous public outcry over this," she said. "This tragically affects so many families and children."

Rich Coleman, now solicitor-general, said the decision to appeal was "disgusting."

But what was once appalling is now policy. The legal appeal and funding

delays are being continued by the Liberals.

In Opposition, the Liberals were brutally critical of long waits for services like speech therapy and family counselling. They pointed out — rightly — that delay was both cruel and costly. A child stuck on a two-year waiting list for speech therapy will fall behind in other areas, causing more problems and more expense.

When the Liberals took over the number of people were waiting for help was larger than the number receiving assistance.

There was no mystery about the problem. The budget was inadequate, and children and families suffered. The Liberals made that argument then. But now their immediate solution is to reduce the amount of counselling or therapy to the minimum. And they maintain that efficiencies can be found to allow massive spending cuts without cutting services.

This government has great support. But that can be eroded quickly if people feel betrayed. And people who believed the Liberals' commitments on autism and the ministry of children and families are feeling increasingly edgy, and in some cases profoundly betrayed.

Protesters were out on three bridges Monday morning in Vancouver, middle-class moms mostly, holding signs. Dawn Steele of Militant Moms on the Move has an eight-year-old son with autism, and she expected the Liberals' new era to include him. She said the protest grew from frustration and despair over broken promises from Premier Campbell's Liberals.

"Why did he promise so much?" Steele asked. "He's made it worse than it already was."

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