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Maternal madness

How an initiative to help mothers and children in the developing world became all about abortion

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When Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that he would make maternal health a major initiative for Canada's presidency of the G8 coming up in late June, it was to widespread approval. Since then, many have wondered how on earth a call for improved maternal and child health in the developing world could evolve into a debate about abortion.

The following chronology aims to clarify what happened.

January 20, 2010—Seven groups co-author a piece called "Putting the world's poor on the G8 agenda." Action Canada for Population and Development, an Ottawa-based lobby group that aims to expand access to abortion internationally is one of them. The other organizations are Plan Canada, Care Canada, Save the Children Canada, Results Canada, UNICEF and World Vision Canada. [1] This "Group of Seven" becomes known as the Canadian Coalition for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (CCMNCH).

January 26, 2010—Prime Minister Stephen Harper announces his intent to use Canada's presidency of the G8 to focus on maternal and child health in an opinion piece in the Toronto Star. Prime Minister Harper indicates that solutions to high maternal and child mortality might include "clean water, inoculations and better nutrition, as well as the training of health workers to care for women and deliver babies" [2]

January 26, 2010—Bev Oda, Minister for International Cooperation, hosts a round table question and answer session with media and the new Canadian Coalition for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. At this session a journalist draws attention to the presence of an abortion rights group (Action Canada) and asks whether reducing infant mortality should be about reducing the number of infants born. [3]

January 26, 2010—The Canadian Coalition for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health puts out a press release lauding the new initiative.

January 27-31, 2010—World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Stephen Harper gives a speech, which includes the focus on maternal and child health. Former UN special envoy for HIV/AIDS Stephen Lewis calls the speech and the initiative "a piece of crass, political opportunism." [4]

January 27-28, 2010—Pro-life groups Campaign Life Coalition, Lifesite News and ProWomanProLife ask questions about why the government would partner with an abortion rights group to fulfill a maternal health mandate. The government replies saying no partner and no mandate has been chosen. [5]

February 3, 2010—Opposition leader Michael Ignatieff hopes he can capitalize on perceived discord in the Conservative ranks on the issue of abortion. He demands the Conservatives include abortion in the

maternal health strategy. In so doing, newspapers report that Ignatieff himself may have taken the boldest position of any Liberal Party leader. [6]

February 18, 2010—Michael Ignatieff's support for abortion results in a Catholic magazine (*Catholic Register*) cover headline of "Ignatieff urges abortion for the world's poor." [7]

March 16, 2010—When asked whether the maternal health initiative will include "family planning," a term which many abortion activists use as a catch-all phrase to include abortion, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon says no. "[The maternal health initiative] does not deal in any way, shape or form with family planning. Indeed, the purpose of this is to be able to save lives," Cannon told the Foreign Affairs committee. [8] Cannon also discounts contraception at this time.

March 18, 2010—Prime Minister Stephen Harper confirms the initiative will include contraception. Minister Oda also highlights that "they will not close the door on any options that will save the lives of mothers and children, including contraception." [9]

March 23, 2010—Bob Rae, Foreign Affairs Critic, brings forward an Opposition Motion, which, without mentioning the word abortion, aims to ensure abortion is part of Canada's maternal health mandate.

The motion said:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government's G8 maternal and child health initiative for the world's poorest regions must include the full range of family planning, sexual and reproductive health options, including contraception, consistent with the policy of previous Liberal and Conservative governments, and all other G8 governments last year in L'Aquila, Italy; that the approach of the Government of Canada must be based on scientific evidence, which proves that education and family planning can prevent as many as one in every three maternal deaths; and that the Canadian government should refrain from advancing the failed right-wing ideologies previously imposed by the George W. Bush administration in the United States, which made humanitarian assistance conditional upon a "global gag rule" that required all non-governmental organizations receiving federal funding to refrain from promoting medically-sound family planning. [10]

The motion that should have easily passed with the support of all three Opposition parties is defeated, 144 to 138. Many Liberals did not come to the vote, and three Liberals, Dan McTeague, Paul Szabo and John McKay, opposed the motion. These motions are non-binding political statements with no teeth, nonetheless, they are public relations events which hold some sway in the media and the general public.

As a result, the Prime Minister may now rightfully claim at the G8 meetings that this matter has been debated in the Canadian House of Commons and that Canada does not include abortion as a part of maternal health. This will be important, as Action Canada for Population and Development had already initiated a lobby of foreign governments to reject any Canadian proposal that does not include abortion. [11]

Many may complain that abortion became the focus, instead of a better understanding of maternal health internationally. However, women's health is a generally politicized topic. Among takeaways from this tempest in a teapot for Canadians and Canadian politicians two stand out: Firstly, that women's health and what that means remain hotly contested and secondly: abortion is a far from resolved issue in Canada.

Endnotes

- [1] McDonald, K., McCort, K., McCarney, R., Dendys, C., Morley, D., Fisher, N. and Toyce, D. (January 20, 2010). *Putting the world's poor on the G8 agenda*. Action Canada for Population and Development. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from www.acpd.ca/print/57
- [2] Harper, S. (January 26, 2010). G8 agenda: Focus on human welfare, *The Toronto Star*, p. A13.
- [3] Journalist Brian Lilley is approached by Action Canada employee, Jennifer Kitts who explains that "family planning is key to reducing maternal mortality and infant deaths." Lilley goes on to recount what happened: "Now I quickly understood how family planning could reduce maternal death but when I asked her to explain how family planning could help children live past their 5th birthday, Ms. Kitts became nervous and asked me to turn off my recorder. I asked her the question again and she told me she would have to do the interview later. The coin eventually dropped; the people at Action Canada plan to reduce infant mortality by reducing the number of infants born. A major part of family planning for ACPD is abortion."
- Lilley, B. (January 26, 2010). Reduce infant and maternal deaths, Harper says G8 must act. *Examiner.com*. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://www.examiner.com/examiner/x-22884-Canada-Politics-Examiner-y2010m1d26-Reduce-infant-and-maternal-deaths-Harper-says-G8-must-act>
- [4] Berthiaume, L. (February 3, 2010). Harper's maternal, child health speech 'political opportunism': Stephen Lewis. *Embassy*. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://www.embassymag.ca/page/view/maternal-02-03-2010>
- [5] Susan Delacourt's *Toronto Star* blog mentioned these sources on February 3, 2010. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://thestar.blogs.com/politics/2010/02/not-so-much-of-a-surprise-part-2.html>
- [6] Libin, K. (February 3, 2010). Ignatieff's fine line between pro-choice and pro-abortion. *National Post*, p. A1.
- [7] Morrison, N. (February 18, 2010). *Catholic Register* takes on Ignatieff. CBC News. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://www.cbc.ca/politics/insidepolitics/2010/02/catholic-register-takes-on-ignatieff.html>
- [8] Clark, C. (March 17, 2010). Birth control won't be in G8 plan to protect mothers, Tories say; 'Signature' initiative meant to save lives, Cannon says, ruling out contraception. *Globe and Mail*, p. A1.
- [9] Playing politics with motherhood. (March 19, 2010). *The Toronto Star*, p. A22.
- [10] Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=4360697&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=40&Ses=3&File=5>
- [11] The brief says: "We call on you to contact your government's foreign ministry and arrange a meeting with the person responsible for the G8 and/or G20 summits. We encourage you to ask them to write a letter to the Canadian government expressing support for a comprehensive approach to addressing maternal and child health, with explicit reference to the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly access to family planning, including contraception."
- Action Canada for Population and Development. (March 17, 2010). *Call to action: Maternal and child health at the G8 Summit*. Retrieved March 24, 2010 from <http://www.acpd.ca/node/62>