

HILTON-O'BRIEN: Will Smith's parental rights policy do the job?

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The news is pretty simple.

When Premier Smith was questioned about the possibility of a parental rights bill last Saturday, she said the province would announce a [policy on parental rights](#) this week.

The assumptions began immediately: *CTV* did an article about Alberta adopting Saskatchewan-style pronoun laws. Right-wing activists put out their wish lists. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) complained that it was not consulted (neither were we). Gay rights organizations all but warned of "reactionary politics based on fear and prejudice."

None of this is likely.

Danielle Smith is the same woman who left the Wildrose Party because she believed in gay-straight alliances. She's also the same woman who expressed surprise and regret that those policies had led to abuses, and to secrets being deliberately kept from parents. We're not going to see a signature piece of socially conservative legislation from her.

Given that the legislature is not in session, we're not going to see legislation at all. What we will probably see is an attempt to rein in abuses, without upsetting any progressive applegarts.

Smith probably sees the primary abuse as having happened under Rachel Notley. Notley indeed

forced all of Alberta's schools to adopt a policy that forced all teachers to keep secrets about children from their own parents.

While Jason Kenney repealed Notley's command to make the policy, he didn't ask that schools remove the policies. Thus, most school boards still have the policy — and it appears administrators often claim that the secrecy policy is "necessary" due to legislation.

And that is it.

That's where Smith is most likely to intervene.

Her policy will probably draw a middle line. She won't be telling schools that they have to immediately tell parents when their children enter gay-straight alliances. What she will do is say that you cannot tell teachers not to talk to parents. She'll want to preserve their freedom of action: let them decide the best time to have such conversations. It's a fine distinction.

There's something else that may go with it.

The ATA has been pushing the idea that teachers are not agents of parents. They push the idea that teachers are agents of the state — and that they should exercise children's rights against parents, without due process.

It gives the ATA a lot of power at the expense of parents and it's

responsible for a lot of the tension between parents and the education establishment. It's an idea whose time has passed — about 80 years ago.

There's a chance — although a slim one — that Smith's policy may deal with this. It may be what she means when she talks about "balancing" parental rights.

If she does, it is perilous. Parents have an absolute right here, which the state cannot traduce: [there are no other stakeholders](#). At the same time, the powerful ATA — which can drop a million dollars as a third-party advertiser — will not lightly let go of anything that gives them power. They're on a collision course.

Now, there's a lot that needs to be done on parental rights. We need a bill of parental rights and UCP members passed a resolution calling for one last fall.

It would also be reasonable to forbid changing a minor's pronouns without consent of the parents.

It would be very helpful to have a policy about what materials are in school libraries and about sexualized materials included in lessons that are ostensibly about other subjects.

We need to simplify the byzantine funding manual. And something needs to be done about our out-of-control children's gender clinic.

Speculating about what Smith may do doesn't get us very far. We know what needs to happen — and we hope her coming policy goes at least a little way on that road.

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