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Parties can't read literacy warnings

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Tonight, Canadians who care about literacy will gather to pay tribute to the man who championed their cause with heart, eloquence and an infectious sense of fun: the late Peter Gzowski.

The legendary radio host, writer and fundraiser was alive when these dinners began in 1993. The last five have been held without him.

The annual gala, organized by ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, a national charity, will be a welcome night of celebration in a time of uncertainty. Publishers, authors, educators, broadcasters and business leaders will be there. Gzowski's daughter, Alison, will attend. So will the community volunteers who tutor Canadians who can't read a prescription, can't fill out a job application and can't decipher a bus schedule.

The private sector is starting to recognize the importance of dealing with the fact that 42 per cent of the working population lacks the reading, language and vocabulary skills to participate in the knowledge economy.

Regrettably, the federal government is withdrawing from the field. Eight months after taking power, the Conservatives chopped funding for adult literacy by \$17.7 million. They replaced the National Literacy Secretariat, set up Brian Mulroney 21 years ago, with their own Office of Literacy and Learning. But it deals only with national organizations. The network of provincial and local literacy organizations that linked thousands of volunteers has withered.

This spring, there was more bad news from Ottawa. The centre of excellence for literacy, anchored at the University of Western Ontario, lost its bid for a renewal of its seven-year mandate. Its funding ran out on March 31.

The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRNet for short) is still in operation. But its campaign to develop a national strategy for early literacy is in doubt. And its ability to keep 37 universities and 100 partner organizations in the private, public and voluntary sectors linked together is in question.

Across the country, educators, librarians, employers and community leaders are doing their best to reach out to people who need help reading, writing and getting started in a new country. But as Judith Maxwell, founding president of Canadian Policy Research Networks, notes: "Governments are more and more leaving it to the individual to find the right literacy training."

Naturally, this withdrawal of support at the top has affected morale in the trenches. Although charities such as the Peter Gzowski Invitational Golf Tournament, ABC

Literacy, the Movement for Canadian Literacy and Frontier College are doing a terrific job, they can't provide a pan-Canadian action plan. Nor do they have the resources to reach the 9 million Canadians whose inability to meet the demands of a typical workplace is holding them back.

This ought to be an issue in the federal election campaign. But none of the political parties has made it a priority.

The Conservatives regard literacy as a provincial responsibility. One of the reasons they cited for cutting federal funding in 2006 was that it wasn't Ottawa's job to do "repair work" for provinces that weren't teaching kids to read properly in the first place.

The Liberals have said they will implement a national literacy strategy. But there's no mention of it – and no money for it – in their election platform.

The New Democrats pledge to "press for a pan-Canadian strategy on lifelong learning that would go beyond simply restoring the Conservative funding cuts." But they have not released details.

The Green party is committed to eliminating illiteracy, but has no plan to do it. It says illiteracy is a reflection of Canada's social deficit.

The Bloc Québécois has no literacy policy, except to demand higher provincial transfer payments.

Worst of all, no one is asking critical questions. How will Canada compete in the knowledge economy when almost half the adult population is falling short of its potential? How will families break the poverty cycle, stay healthy or participate in elections when they struggle to comprehend the world around them?

Tonight, literacy advocates will hail their heroes. Tomorrow, they'll fight for those who need more than heroes.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.