

# Bringing Quebec costs to B.C. daycares a key commitment for NDP<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

In another province, Valerie Anne Fontaine experienced a daycare reality the BC NDP hopes to offer to British Columbians, one where the daily cost of daycare was less than \$20.

When Ms. Fontaine, her husband and their son, now 6, lived in the Quebec city of Gatineau, near Ottawa, daycare was \$7.55 a day or about \$140 a month. In the 1990s, the province enacted a program of \$5-a-day daycare that has since become an institution, although the cost for parents has increased.

But when Ms. Fontaine and her family moved last year to the B.C. municipality of Delta, she ended up paying \$40 a day for child care, or about \$800 a month.

"It was very frustrating, at first, to realize this was becoming a reality," Ms. Fontaine, who works as an operations director for a company that sells contact lenses online, said of the increase in daycare costs. At times, she said she was effectively working for a week to raise money for daycare costs for her son.

Now, the NDP are looking for a way to connect with voters after a defeat in the 2013 election it was widely expected to win. The party is banking on a commitment to bring daycare in line with those Quebec costs by enacting \$10-a-day daycare as a key piece of its platform's so-called affordability agenda.

NDP Leader John Horgan talked up the idea last fall, and said this week that it remains a "centrepiece" commitment. "This is a bold idea whose time is long overdue," he said.

The idea has been around for a while, but will get more prominence in this campaign because the NDP is going to make it a key issue. An NDP government would have to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars into training staff, consolidating spaces and covering operating costs.

Parents would pay \$10, but various estimates have suggested the annual bill to the province for a fully operating system could be about \$1.5-billion. Proponents of the idea, citing impacts in Quebec, say that it allows parents greater freedom to get into the work force, generating tax revenue that offsets the cost of the program.

Still, the Quebec program has had problems, and has caused fiscal stress for the provincial government. In recent years, Quebec introduced a sliding-scale that sees families earning net income of more than \$50,000 pay in excess of the standard \$7.55 a day. For some families, the cost can reach up to \$20.70 daily. Last year, Premier Philippe Couillard faced criticism from his predecessor, Pauline Marois, who engineered the program as Parti Québécois education minister back in the 1990s.

But the NDP says what it will propose won't be the Quebec program with B.C. stamped over it. "We can learn from Quebec, but we can do better," said NDP MLA Jodie Wickens, whom Mr. Horgan has named party point person for the plan.

Mr. Horgan has previously suggested a tax on upper-income earners to raise about \$200-million, and suggested seeking federal funding for the program. The \$200-million would leave him about \$1.3-billion short of paying the annual bill. This week, the NDP Leader said both options remain "very much in play," but the party is consolidating the mechanics of the system ahead of an official announcement in the coming weeks.

There is, however, one notable catch to the NDP proposal: It would take a while to enact.

"I don't want to hold out hope for those parents who have got a 4-year-old, who are hoping that next September there is going to be space for them because we can't move that quickly," Mr. Horgan said.

"This isn't going to happen on the first day of the first term. This is something we're going to be committed to working on over the course

of a mandate, delivering first for those who need it the most and then developing that to make it a universal program. In 10 years, it will be as commonplace as the system in Quebec today where people don't question it, whether they have kids or don't have kids."

The B.C. Liberals have long been opposed to the idea. Asked about the issue this week, Premier Christy Clark said she is committed to affordable, accessible daycare but that a Quebec-style program, which she pegged at costing \$2.4-billion, was too expensive for B.C., which offers voters lower taxes than Quebec.

"We all want to improve daycare availability and services for people, but we also need to figure out how we are going to pay for that," Ms. Clark said at a news conference on another matter in Burnaby. "We don't want to be paying the same taxes here that people do in Quebec. It makes life just way less affordable for everybody."

Still, Ms. Fontaine is impressed with the concept.

"It would be amazing, especially since, here, the cost of living is higher than, I believe, any other province in Canada," she said.

"This would benefit so many families to have the difference between a thousand dollars and a maximum of \$200 or \$300 a month. [The difference] could go for groceries. It could go for the car you're trying to pay off. This could go to your mortgage."

And, as it turns out, it could also correct what some see as a major error for the NDP in the 2013 election when the Liberals pulled off a surprise win, securing their fourth straight majority government.

Some said the NDP campaign lacked pizzazz, something to grab voter attention. In a revealing postmortem, campaign director Brian Topp wrote that the party failed to offer the kind of compelling program that NDP icon Tommy Douglas said was key to successful campaigns.

"We needed a big dream like that in this campaign – an inspiring, aspirational goal that could not possibly happen overnight but was worth working towards," Mr. Topp wrote, adding that Ms. Clark's big dream was the development of the liquefied natural gas industry.

In 2017, Mr. Horgan and his team seem to have concluded that \$10-a-day daycare is the big dream that may connect with some of the voters the party will need to win power for the first time since 2001. New Democrats see the idea as catchy, straightforward and appropriate. While there will be other pieces of their affordability agenda, the daycare idea will be a particularly flashy component.

Although Mr. Horgan said a final cost of the NDP plan will come with the official release of the policy details, he said Ms. Clark was fabricating costs for the program. "The Premier makes stuff up as she goes along and, in this case, I would prefer that she stick to the facts."

The Liberals have taken a more incremental approach to the issue. This week's provincial budget reaffirms their commitment to create 13,000 new licensed child-care spaces by 2020 as part of their B.C. Early Years Strategy. There are also child-care subsidies for families that earn up to \$55,000. In addition, the province is spending \$20-million to create up to 2,000 new child-care spaces.

A spokesperson for the provincial Green Party said it would soon release a policy on child care as part of a platform rollout that begins next month.

Hamish Telford, a political-science professor at the University of the Fraser Valley, said in an interview that there's certainly a constituency that would find the idea appealing. But, he said, it has to make financial sense to a larger cohort of voters. It also needs to be embedded in a larger, credible program to manage the economy.

Prof. Telford also noted that the federal Liberals in 2006 and the federal NDP in 2015 both were defeated despite ambitious daycare agendas.

Still, the New Democrats remain committed.

Paul Kershaw, who has worked on the schematics for a \$10-per-day program as a professor in the population and public-health school at the University of British Columbia, says he did a presentation on the concept to the NDP caucus last month.

"I've looked them in the eye," he quipped, but added that the party appears "serious" about it.

The key, he said, will be to commit to putting a lot of money on the table quite quickly if the NDP win power – \$200-million in year one, \$400-million in year two and \$600-million or \$700-million in year three.

"I think they're aware of the need to phase in hundreds of millions of dollars year over year to get up to a level that is small by comparison to the education budget or the health-care budget but still is a significant budget," Prof. Kershaw said.

The party, he said, is working on creating a credible plan for voters.

"If they do that, then I do believe British Columbians can become quite excited."

-reprinted from The Globe and Mail

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[4]</sup>

election <sup>[5]</sup>

funding <sup>[6]</sup>

universal <sup>[7]</sup>

NDP <sup>[8]</sup>

child care system <sup>[9]</sup>

\$10-a-day daycare <sup>[10]</sup>

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