

For Trudeau's Liberals, universal daycare is a distant dream ^[1]

Opinion

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Jun 2017

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Hot off announcing the first deal with an individual province under a new national framework signed earlier in the week, Jean-Yves Duclos gamely tried to paint it as the start of a process that will lead to affordable child care for all.

“Eventually, we’ll get to universality,” the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development insisted in an interview on Friday in Toronto, and there is “no tension” between that goal and the sort of agreement he had just unveiled alongside his counterpart in Kathleen Wynne’s government. Sure, federal funds – \$435-million for Ontario over three years, in this case – will mostly go toward daycare subsidies for relatively few low-income or socially challenged families. But all the coming collaboration, he said, will create “momentum” leading to more far-reaching investment.

Maybe it will, one day. Just not with the urgency briefly displayed by a different federal Liberal regime over a decade ago.

In 2005, as Mr. Duclos is surely tired of being reminded, Paul Martin pledged \$5-billion over five years to launch a national commitment comparable to Quebec’s subsidized daycare for all. Even though access and affordability have become more dire since then – monthly costs for infants approaching \$2,000 in some cities, if parents can find spaces – Justin Trudeau’s government is offering less money annually (\$7.5-billion over 11 years) targeted more narrowly.

The scaled-back ambition, as some parents have to consider leaving jobs because they scarcely earn enough to cover daycare alone, may be incongruous with both Mr. Trudeau’s much-ballyhooed feminism and his endless talk of “the middle class and those seeking to join it.”

But plenty has changed in the Liberals’ calculus about universal daycare’s merits since last they were in office – some policy-related, much of it political.

Mr. Duclos, a respected economist new to politics, was more inclined to cite the policy considerations. He pointed out, for instance, that “data around early learning and child care in Canada is both scarce and of poor quality.”

Some of the new federal cash is being allocated toward information-gathering, to help with the momentum.

His main defence against complaints that the government’s investment is too modest is that Ottawa is spending much more on child care now than back in Mr. Martin’s day – that is, if one counts not just direct investment, but also more general transfer payments to the provinces, tax deductions, and the Canada Child Benefit.

It’s that last one – a centrepiece of the Liberals’ 2015 election platform – that speaks to where politics come in.

After Stephen Harper replaced Mr. Martin’s plan with his Universal Child Care Benefit, Mr. Trudeau could have made the case to voters that Mr. Martin was right and Mr. Harper wrong, since daycare costs for many Canadians had continued to skyrocket such that the monthly benefit offered only a drop in the bucket. Instead, the Liberals effectively embraced Mr. Harper’s premise that parents rather than government should decide where money goes – introducing their own version of the benefit that costs billions more annually, with more for lower- and middle-income earners and less for the top 10 per cent.

Given that they do not generally share Mr. Harper’s ideological aversion to social-policy interventionism, the Liberals were tacitly acknowledging that they considered universal daycare a political loser. And they certainly were not alone in assessing that, even though daycare is a pressing problem in many Canadians’ lives, it is hard to persuade enough voters a political party can provide a necessary, activist fix.

Even as Tom Mulcair ran in that 2015 campaign on something akin to what Mr. Martin had introduced, members of his NDP campaign team acknowledged their research showed it did not resonate with a sufficient number of their target voters. And as with the Liberals 10 years earlier, who lost to the Tories, the results seemed to bear that out, at least at the national level. (The recent platform of British Columbia’s New Democrats, on the verge of leading a minority government, included \$10/day daycare.)

The big challenge is convincing any voter they would benefit personally. Confidence in governments to deliver big, long-term programs is low to begin with. No parents grappling with daycare costs as universal coverage was announced would expect it to be in place in time to help them. And few of the future parents who would benefit would likely have it top of mind when voting.

In the interview, Mr. Duclos said that when he spoke to a seniors group this week, he was surprised to find support for the new federal-provincial plan, among people attuned to their sons' and daughters' child-care challenges.

That raised the prospect that at some point, if affordability keeps getting worse and worse, the multiplier effect from each parent struggling to make ends meet will be enough to compel a more comprehensive response.

But for now, Mr. Trudeau's Liberals are settling for enough on daycare to ease their social consciences and prevent the NDP from accusing them of not doing anything.

What they are doing should not be shrugged off – as Mr. Duclos argued, it makes sense to start with investment in high-need families likely to reap the most benefit from easier daycare access. It's just a much slower start than the one their party had last decade, before it ran into an electoral wall.

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