

Babies in the House: No parental leave for MPs^[1]

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Source: CTV News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Jan 2018

AVAILABILITY

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When the House of Commons resumes at the end of the month, the chamber will be welcoming two new faces; NDP MP Niki Ashton's twin boys Stephanos and Leonidas.

Ashton, 35, anticipates she'll often have her three-month-old babies with her during debate, votes, and at meetings, because she thinks it'll send an important message to young women who want to run for office, but also because the current setup on the Hill leaves her little other option.

This could mean Ashton having a baby under each arm as she rises to speak, or having to leave them with staff in her Parliament Hill office, where she'll have a playard set up.

"The supports available to me through the House of Commons are largely inadequate," the new mom and former NDP leadership contender told CTV News.ca in a telephone interview from her northern Manitoba riding.

As the rules currently stand, MPs:

- Are not provided parental leave, because they don't pay in to Employment Insurance;
- Are allowed 21 days of medical leave before being docked \$120 pay per day they are absent; and
- Have no formal way to report with the House of Commons that their absence is because of a maternity or paternity leave.
- If they want to take more time off than the permitted leave, each new mom has to work out an arrangement with their party leadership and whip. It means having their colleagues fill in for them on House duty and at committee.

Once back on the Hill, the existing childcare services leave much to be desired for politicians who work long hours or have young kids. The daycare on Parliament Hill, for parliamentarians, staff, and journalists doesn't take children under 18 months of age, there is no drop-in option, and it closes by 6 p.m., while the House of Commons is rarely adjourned for the day by then. The cost for the Children on the Hill toddler program is \$69.03 a day, and \$48.66 a day for the preschool program.

There is a relatively new babysitting program available on the Hill for children 3 months to 12 years, but MPs pay just over \$14/hour if they want someone to watch their child.

[Twitter post from 'nikiashtonmp', from January 11, 2018: "Back in the office on Parliament Hill with two special visitors. 2017 was a watershed year politically and personally. Looking ahead to 2018. There is so much to fight for- given the challenges in our North and across the country. The way forward is to organize and build a movement for justice for all."].

"This arrangement... is not reflective of the needs of so many that work on Parliament Hill and that ought to change," Ashton said. "It shouldn't be up to each party, there ought to be a supportive and accessible structure in place for all MPs, and that's simply not the case right now."

'Need' to talk about parental leave: Gould

With more federal politicians and others who work on Parliament Hill experiencing this firsthand, as there is a slowly but surely growing contingent of female MPs of childbearing age exploring their childcare options, there is an increasing push to think seriously about revamping the rules to reflect the current demographics.

Among the common and repeated requests for reform: A formal parental leave program, improving childcare services on the Hill, and using technology such as electronic voting and video conferencing to permit MPs to participate remotely.

Democratic Institutions Minister and expectant mother, Karina Gould has joined this call for change, saying it's time to talk about updating the rules.

"If we're going to be really intentional about encouraging young people, and particularly young women to run for office, we need to have that conversation about how maternity and paternity leave work as well for Members of Parliament," she told CTV News.ca.

Gould, 30, is expecting her first child in early March. She is planning to come back to the Hill for the first few weeks of the winter sitting, then will stay in her Burlington, Ont. riding for between six to eight weeks before returning to Parliament in May.

She will be the first minister—something she finds surprising—to have a baby while in cabinet.

[Twitter post from 'karinagould', "Week 22! Back in Ottawa and looking forward to this week in Parliament. #addwomentochangethehouse #babyonboard #Parliament", from October 29, 2017]

Over the last two Parliaments there have been more new mothers occupying seats in the House of Commons than ever before, and with many of the new additions, Gould isn't the first MP to make history in this way. Ashton was the first MP to run for the leadership of a federal party while pregnant; and just a few months ago Bloc Québécois MPs Marilène Gill and Xavier Barsalou-Duval became the first sitting MP couple to have a child together. This growing contingent of new parents were just young children themselves when then-Liberal MP Sheila Copps became the first sitting MP to give birth in 1987.

"She's an incredible role model I think, for women of all ages... She really blazed the trail on all of this, and one of the things I remember her saying is 'you can do it,'" Gould said, referencing a conversation she had with Copps a while ago.

Politicians aren't the only ones amid a baby boom; top political staffers for both Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer are also expecting.

'We're going to change': PM

The prime minister championed working out Gould's situation when he spoke at the Fortune Most Powerful Women Summit in Washington D.C. in October 2017.

"We're having to look at how we change things in the workplace," Trudeau said.

There, he acknowledged that maternity leave for politicians is largely an open question, figured out on a case-by-case basis. He also noted that the current system can deter women from entering politics.

"We're writing this, but we're writing it together, with her [Gould] and she gets to help define it, and hopefully we get to show that it's possible to be a minister, and a mom," said Trudeau. "We're going to change."

While there has been change and excitement, according to Gould, within the Privy Council Office—which handles the machinery of government related to ministers—the federal government has yet to take any concrete action on their pledge to make Parliament more "family-friendly."

For Gould, like others who have walked this path, she doesn't plan to fully stop working while she's on leave. As a minister there is less of a daily obligation to be present in the House and she can co-ordinate much of her work online.

However, for the other new parents on Parliament Hill, there are a number of reforms that the growing contingent of new parents are calling for; including allowing electronic voting so MPs don't have to be present in the House of Commons, to have a say.

"It's time for Justin Trudeau to step up in terms of his commitment to feminism... and set the bar higher for Canadian women," Ashton said.

About representation

"Our work as MPs is centred on this notion of representation and part of representation is being able to vote on legislation and just because we might not be able to be there physically every day for a period of time, we should be able to have a say in legislation that's coming forward," Ashton said, suggesting these changes could easily be made, if there is political will.

It is part of Government House Leader Bardish Chagger's mandate letter to work with the opposition to look at how the House could be better tailored to MPs' work-life balance.

So far, this exploration has not gone far. The Procedure and House Affairs Committee has studied the matter and has recommended Canada take steps to catch up to other Parliaments. The government has yet to respond to the findings tabled in November.

Among their recommendations: writing into the rules that babies are allowed inside the House, something currently done by convention; bringing in legislation to end the docking of MPs' pay if they miss sitting days because of their pregnancy or parental leave; opening up a "family room" near the Chamber; and asking the Hill daycare to consider more flexible hours and opening up spots for children under 18 months of age.

One of the most prolific advocates for reform is two-term NDP MP Christine Moore, 34, who had her first daughter Daphnée while campaigning for her rural Quebec seat during the 2015 election, and welcomed her second, Laurence, in the spring of 2017.

"We just have to act. We have the time," she testified at the House affairs committee during its study.

Some changes, including electronic voting and getting rid of Friday sittings, were proposed by the Liberals when they attempted to reform the rules of the House last year, though they accompanied other contentious changes such as formalizing a prime minister's question period, which the Conservatives and New Democrats balked at.

Setting an example

Equal Voice, an organization dedicated to encouraging women to run for office, recently spoke up about how House of Commons rules should be modernized to "build a more inclusive legislature."

"We are asking women wanting to have families to abstain from pursuing public life because our national legislature can't seem to get its head around it. And, by extension, we are telling Canadians that representative democracy has its limits because of gender," Equal Voice spokesperson Nancy Peckford said, in an op-ed published Jan. 15.

Ashton said federal politicians should be setting an example, and raising the bar federally, as access to childcare is not an issue unique to Parliament Hill.

Of her own parental journey, Gould is hopeful that she'll be able to demonstrate that having kids doesn't preclude a woman from being successful.

"I really do hope that other young women see this and are encouraged to know that they can do both," she said.

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