

Liberals mulling use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave, Trudeau says ^[1]

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is raising the idea of creating a use-it-or-lose-it, funded leave for new dads, doing so days before he unveils a spending blueprint that has been the focus of lobbying efforts for further changes to national parental leave policies.

The idea would be similar to the paternity leave policy in Quebec, which is the only province that provides funded leave for new fathers.

Quebec's system provides up to five weeks of paid leave to new fathers that covers up to 70 per cent of their income.

The Liberals have heard from experts that the popular program in Quebec should be replicated at a federal level along with other changes to parental leave policies, including increasing the value of benefits paid out for parents who opt for an 18-month parental leave and creating a new, six-month leave option with a higher income replacement rate to help low-income families that can't afford a year at only half salary.

There have also been calls to make such a leave available to anyone who isn't considered a primary caregiver, such as a grandparent.

The Liberals will release their third budget next week.

Trudeau told a forum at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, India, that making it easier for non-birthing parents, like fathers, to take time off to care for a newborn would help remove barriers women face in the workforce related to expectations that they be primarily responsible for child-rearing.

There is anecdotal evidence that women who are of child-bearing age or are pregnant are passed over for jobs or promotions, even though such actions are prohibited under the Canadian Human Rights Act.

Trudeau said his government will look at changes to parental leave, specifically "leave that can only be taken by the second parent, in most cases the father," making it "a use-it-or-lose-it" model. He also suggested the leave would be flexible beyond fathers to include, for instance, a partner in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender marriages.

"Whatever format you have, that path is removing some of the barriers and the obligations and the expectations that hold women back in the workforce, so there are a lot of things to do and we're going to have," he said before switching to talk about the 2017 budget.

"We're going to do more in the upcoming budget that we're putting forward in just a few weeks, but there's always going to be much more to do."

Trudeau's government has been paying closer attention to parental leave options since their changes received a cool welcome late last year.

Under new rules that came into effect in December, new parents can spread 12 months of employment insurance benefits over 18 months, even though experts, labour and business groups expressed concern the program would only benefit families with higher incomes.

Last year's budget pegged the cost of the measure at \$152-million over five years and \$27.5-million a year afterwards.

An analysis of recently released census data by the Vanier Institute of the Family found fathers are increasingly taking more time off after the birth of a child. In a report last month, the institute found 30 per cent of recent fathers in 2016 reported they took, or intended to take, parental leave, up from three per cent in 2000.

Much of the national increase was due to Quebec's program. In that province, 80 per cent of fathers claimed or planned to take parental leave in 2016, almost triple the 28 per cent recorded in 2005.

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