

New parental leave planned in budget aims to get women into workforce ^[1]

Upcoming federal budget to include a five-week incentive for new dads to take parental leave

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Feb 2018

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Introducing a new incentive for fathers to take parental leave has largely been driven by the government's attempt to promote gender equality, including allowing women to return to work after having a baby, according to a cabinet minister who oversaw the consultations.

The upcoming federal budget will include a five-week, use-it-or-lose-it incentive for the second parent to take parental leave and share the responsibilities of raising their young child, The Canadian Press has learned.

"Our government is trying to be, and I think is quite successful, at being a feminist government," Jean-Yves Duclos, minister of families, children and social development, told The House on Friday.

He stressed that gender equality is at the heart of the development of the government's work surrounding parental leave.

"When we have a greater equality of parental leave and parental activities, we also are able to achieve a greater equality of life and work outcomes."

Though unwilling to speak directly concerning the budget, Duclos said the earlier consultations on parental leave showed it would lead to greater opportunity for women in the workforce at a time when Canada needs to do more to promote gender equality.

The goal behind the use-it-or-lose-it leave — to be included in Tuesday's budget — is to give parents more incentive to share child-rearing responsibilities so that new moms can more easily re-enter the workforce, said a government official, speaking to the Canadian Press on condition of anonymity because the budget details have yet to be made public.

Duclos said government estimates show facilitating women's careers will help grow the GDP by 0.6 per cent annually.

Modelled after Quebec

The idea of parental leave for a second parent would be similar to a policy in Quebec, according to the Canadian Press. Quebec, which is the only province that pays for leave for new fathers, has a system that provides up to five weeks of paid leave to new fathers and covers

up to 70 per cent of their income.

Almost 80 per cent of eligible fathers in Quebec took parental leave in 2014, compared to just over 25 per cent of fathers in the rest of Canada, according to Statistics Canada.

But announcing a standalone parental leave policy won't help families transition in and out of the workforce smoothly, said Kate Bezanson, a social policy and parental leave expert from Brock University.

There are "two big, magic bullets" of policy that need to happen at the same time, she explained — parental leave and child care.

The 2017 budget contained \$7 billion over a decade to open up child-care spaces across Canada, but it may not be enough, Duclos admitted.

"But we need to start from somewhere," he said. "We need to build that over time."

[Interview with Kate Bezanson on The House, audio clip available online]

Expanded leave remains a question

Expanded parental leave, giving parents the option of spreading 12 months of benefits over 18 months, came into effect in December — and questions remain on how welcome that change has been.

Employment and Social Development Canada was unable to tell CBC News how many families had taken advantage of the revised leave since it was implemented, but Duclos said his department estimates 20,000 families a year will opt to use it.

The Liberals have been urged to raise the value of benefits paid to parents who opt for an 18-month parental leave, and to provide low-income families with access to a six-month leave option with a higher rate of income replacement.

Some have also recommended making leaves available to people who aren't considered a primary caregiver, such as a grandparent.

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