

# Parental leave for MPs a first, to be seen how it addresses reality of political life <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

For the first time the federal government is pursuing a parental leave program for parliamentarians, but questions are being raised about how it'll work for politicians whose jobs centre on representing their constituents year-round.

With a slowly growing contingent of female MPs of childbearing age and MPs with young families, there has been an increasing push to think seriously about revamping the rules to reflect the changing demographics. The 2018 budget took steps to address this, including promising a first-ever parental leave program for parliamentarians.

However, MPs will have to determine how to offer their colleagues time off to be with their newborns, while balancing their responsibilities as elected officials who operate under the idea that they're "always working."

"The people are our bosses, and so it's a little bit difficult to navigate so we'll have to see what the government, what ideas they have," said Conservative House Leader Candice Bergen in an interview with CTVNews.ca. "You're always working, you're always on, always needing and wanting to meet with people, and to do your job."

In the 2018 budget tabled on Feb. 27, the government said it plans to create a system for maternity and parental leave for parliamentarians and will introduce amendments to the Parliament of Canada Act to do so.

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;
- If they want to take more time off than the permitted leave, each new parent has to work out an arrangement with their party leadership and whip on a case-by-case basis; and
- Once back on the Hill, the existing childcare services leave much to be desired for politicians who work long hours or have young kids.

Government House Leader Bardish Chagger -- who has been mandated to look at how the House could be better tailored to MPs' work-life balance and is expected to spearhead this plan -- so far has no specific timeline or additional details on when the legislation to institute parental leave will come, or how it'll work.

"There is no legislation or policy on parental leave for Parliamentarians. We believe this should change," she said in an email to CTVNews.ca. She said her plan is to work with both MPs and senators on their respective Internal Economy committees to develop the policy and said the concepts lean heavily on the recommendations from the Procedure and House Affairs Committee's study on the facilities available for MPs with kids.

### **'A different kind of parental leave'**

NDP MP Niki Ashton has been a vocal proponent of improving the services available in Ottawa for parliamentarians who are new parents. After giving birth to twin boys four months ago, Ashton has returned to Parliament Hill with them on either hip.

Speaking to MPs ability to represent their constituents potentially being impacted by taking parental leave, Ashton told CTV News last week that while the work doesn't really stop, parental leave for MPs could consider a smaller window of time or different breakdown than is available to the general population.

"We should be looking at a bit of a different time frame absolutely, but what I would say is right now there is no recognition... and that's not good enough."

Ashton said she was back on job going to local events eleven days after giving birth.

"There needs to be a different kind of parental leave. When we're in the constituency we are doing work... so just because we're not on Parliament Hill doesn't necessarily mean we're not doing the work," she told CTV News last week.

Bergen also suggested that the proposed parental leave should not be more generous than what is offered to other Canadians.

Democratic Institutions Minister Karina Gould is currently on leave, in the anticipation of her first child in the coming days. She plans to stay in her Burlington, Ont. riding for six to eight weeks before returning to Parliament in May, but has pledged to stay involved locally.

Status of Women Minister Maryam Monsef said the pledge to bring in parental leave is directly aimed at getting more women into federal politics, though she anticipates male MPs will be able to use the program as well.

"A diverse range of people need to take their seats in their house to ensure that our Parliament looks like our Canada," Monsef said in an interview with CTVNews.ca. "A lot of the decisions we make in Parliament are on behalf of the next generation," she said.

As for whether she is concerned that some Canadians may not like seeing their elected representatives taking time off, Monsef said: "The people who elect us expect us to have a lot in common with them and to know their realities."

### **House of Commons rules changing**

In the 2018 budget the government also pledged to work with the other parties to implement other recommendations from the House Affairs Committee aimed at making Parliament more family-friendly. But this will come with re-opening the contentious Standing Orders, the rules that govern MPs and the House of Commons.

Among what the committee proposes that the government wants to put into action:

- Providing access to child care and designated spaces for MPs with children, including infants
- Taking steps to accommodate and balance work and the responsibilities of MPs with outside life; and
- Amending the standing orders to allow babies on the floor chamber, which is something currently done by convention.

Chagger did not directly answer whether she'd be looking to make other changes to the rules when the Standing Orders are amended to allow babies in the chamber.

A past attempt this Parliament made to update the Standing Orders resulted in acrimony between the government and the opposition and a filibuster in protest over the Liberals' attempt to unilaterally change the rules for all MPs, without all MPs support.

The Conservatives so far do not support the proposal to re-open the Standing Orders in order to make this change.

"I don't see that the Standing Orders have to be changed. I think we all recognize that sometimes a mom or a dad who's an MP has to bring their baby in for just a short time and I think it's working well," Bergen said.

-reprinted from CTV News

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