

The daycare caucus: How the Commons is coping with a baby boom ^[1]

PM Trudeau says he wants to change Commons rules to make MPs' children more welcome

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Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Mar 2018

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EXCERPTS

The House of Commons has been turning an official blind eye to a group that its rules regard as strangers — the newborn children of MPs.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a Toronto audience Thursday that he is going to ask the Commons to change the wording of those rules to permit MPs to work and look after their kids at the same time.

"So that infants can be cared for by their parents while they are on the floor of the House of Commons. Babies should never be considered strangers in the House," said Trudeau.

'Stranger' is the parliamentary term for someone who isn't a MP or Commons staffer and is therefore not permitted on the floor of the House while it's in session.

Liberal Sheila Copps was the first MP to give birth while in office in 1987, but it was Nova Scotia NDP MP Michelle Dockerill who first brought her young son to the floor of the Commons.

On the evening of Tuesday, October 27, 1998, Dockerill was allowed to hold her son for a series of late night votes.

MPs vote by standing at their seats or by calling out "yea" or "nay" — things you can only do when you're physically present in the chamber.

Juggling parenthood and politics

A baby boom swept the Commons after the 2011 election, with a handful of female Quebec NDP MPs becoming mothers while in office.

Every new parent quickly learns that the birth of a baby changes everything. The NDP's Sana Hassainia got a reminder of that fact when her personal and professional lives collided in February, 2012, after she brought her son onto the Commons floor for a vote.

Hassainia and Speaker Andrew Scheer got their wires crossed; Hassainia told reporters she'd been asked by a page to take her three-month-old out of the chamber, while Scheer's office later told reporters he'd merely asked MPs who were snapping pictures of mother and son to sit down so a vote could proceed.

"In their wisdom, my predecessors in the Chair have handled these situations by turning a blind eye and, given that the presence of babies did not create disturbances, allowing House business to proceed uninterrupted," Scheer, a father of five, said later.

The House of Commons sits most days from mid-morning into the evening hours, but votes — sometimes called with just 30 minutes notice — can play havoc with MPs' schedules even when they don't have small children in tow.

The House of Commons daycare is open from early in the morning until 6 pm, but it only takes children after they turn 18 months old.

It typically looks after the children of House staffers; most MPs tend to leave their young children at home in their ridings, where their support networks are more established.

Since 2015, the Commons Procedures and House Affairs committee has worked to make the Commons more family-friendly. MPs now have access to a family room in Centre Block, dining areas with high chairs and child-friendly food options.

The kids caucus

The caucus of parents with infants tends to group in one corner of the Commons on the opposition side, furthest from the Speaker and the MPs who spend the most time appearing on television.

That seating reflects the fact that the MP moms with babies have tended to be members of the NDP or Bloc Québécois caucuses — until Democratic Reform Minister Karina Gould recently became the first federal cabinet minister to give birth while in office.

Green Party Leader Elizabeth May sits behind the New Democrats and beside the Bloquistes, a vantage that gives her a kind of honorary caregiver status. May said she tries to entertain Quebec NDP MP Christine Moore's youngest daughter Laurence, who is almost crawling.

[Video: "MPs Karina Gould and Christine Moore juggle political life with motherhood, available online]

To May's right sit two of the remaining members of the Bloc caucus — parents of a young boy named Ulysse who, May said, is known for his "good set of lungs."

Most parents dealing with a grouchy baby can always pick them up and take them for a walk. That's not an option for MPs facing a series of votes in the Commons. May said she observed NDP MP Gord Johns bouncing Ulysse up and down while his folks were engaged on the people's business.

Johns' seat mate, Alistair MacGregor, watched his colleague do his babysitting bit. "On that last vote, I think he voted with the NDP!" he shouted across at May.

The Commons baby boom continued with Manitoba NDP MP Niki Ashton becoming the mother of twin boys late last fall. Members of her family have taken turns sitting in the Opposition lobby behind a set of gold curtains, taking care of the kids while mom works.

Gould is expected to be off work until May. Members of Parliament are afforded 21 days medical leave, but don't qualify for maternity or paternity leave — something the prime minister says he plans to change with legislation later this year.

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