

Ontario's child care election promises win praise from B.C. finance minister ^[1]

Child care helped British Columbia's NDP government get elected. Will it be a ballot box question in Ontario?

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EXCERPTS

At a recent baby shower in her Victoria hometown, British Columbia's NDP Finance Minister Carole James couldn't help notice how times had changed.

Instead of sharing tips on how to get babies to sleep through the night, parents were fretting about child care.

"I just heard panic from all these young moms and young dads. Which one of them could take time out of their jobs? Or did you get yourself on the (child care) wait list, the day you found out you were pregnant?" recalled James, who has two grandchildren, ages 7 and 11.

"It was not the kind of enjoyable conversation and sharing that you would expect at a baby shower. It was real anxiety that shouldn't be there for people."

That anxiety, felt by young families and also by businesses scrambling to attract and retain employees as the population ages, was behind the NDP's decision to make universal child care a key plank in their election platform a year ago, James said.

And it was a winner.

"No question, it had an influence in the provincial election," she told the Star in a wide-ranging interview about child care's popularity in the polls.

James, who was in Toronto last week to address the Economic Council of Canada, says she isn't surprised Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne is offering free child care for preschoolers starting in 2020 along with a provincial wage grid to boost pay in the sector as part of the Liberals' bid for re-election later this spring.

"I think we are reaching a turning point," she said.

The Wynne government's recent \$2.2 billion budget initiative is coupled with its 2016 commitment to create 100,000 new licensed spots for kids under age 4 within five years.

Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath last week vowed to "do better" in her election platform. Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives have yet to say anything on the issue.

"It's a very positive sign that we are seeing child care as such a large part of the discussion (in Ontario)," James said. "We want to see other provinces move ahead, regardless of how elections turn out."

Parents in B.C. and Ontario pay some of the highest child care fees in the country. Median fees for infants top \$16,300 a year in Vancouver and \$21,000 in Toronto.

The B.C. government's recent \$1 billion budget investment in child care is not only good for families, but smart economics, James said.

"When you look at demographics . . . when you have the Governor of the Bank of Canada speaking in favour of child care as a recruitment and retention issue, getting women back into the workforce is critical," she told the Star.

The longer women are out of the workforce after having children, the lower their earnings and the fewer their career advancement opportunities, James noted, arguing governments can't advance pay equity without child care.

It is the same point Wynne made last month.

"If we don't do something to give more women the choice to return to work after having kids and do it on their own terms, then we will never achieve gender equality," Wynne said.

Both politicians argue their plans are economically responsible and point to the experience of Quebec, where universal, affordable child

care has been provincial policy for two decades.

A 2011 study of Quebec's \$7-a-day scheme showed governments recoup \$1.50 in consumption and income taxes for every dollar the province spends on child care. (Child care fees in Quebec are now based on income and cost families between \$7.75 and \$21.20 a day.)

The workforce participation of women of child-bearing age in Quebec has jumped to 87 per cent from 74 per cent since the program began 20 years ago, while it sits at just 83 per cent in the rest of Canada.

Child poverty rates in Quebec are the lowest of any province in the country at 14.4 per cent, according to 2015 tax filer data compiled by Campaign 2000. The rate in B.C. is 18.3 per cent while child poverty in Ontario is 17.2 per cent.

B.C. studied the Quebec model before designing its own 10-year initiative, James said.

Under the B.C. plan, launched in James's February budget, monthly fees for infants and toddlers dropped by \$350 for all parents starting April 1 in participating child care centres. Monthly fees in home-based daycares were cut by \$200.

For low- to moderate-income parents, a new B.C. child care benefit — to replace the province's out-of-date subsidy system — will further help reduce fees for families with pre-tax incomes of up to \$111,000 beginning in September. Families earning less than \$45,000 would pay nothing, James said.

Funding to create 22,000 new licensed spaces and bursaries to support staff training in early childhood education are also part of the budget's three-year plan.

B.C. has roughly 105,000 licensed child care spots for children under age 12, enough to serve about 18 per cent of the province's young children.

Ontario has more than 406,000 licensed spots, enough to serve about 22 per cent of children under age 12.

Ottawa budgeted \$7 billion over 10 years in its 2017 budget to help lower-income families access high-quality licensed care. But that is barely 70 per cent of what the previous Liberal government committed through bilateral agreements with the provinces in 2005, James said.

"The words are there when they talk about gender and supporting women," she said, referring to the recent federal budget. "We would have expected them to have come to the table with more resources than they have."

With two of the country's largest provinces launching universal child care initiatives, Canada is experiencing a watershed moment, said national expert Martha Friendly, of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"These are two big provinces with at least two different parties putting out very progressive goals in this area," she said.

The question now, is what role will Ottawa play. "Medicare started in Saskatchewan. But it took the federal government to make it into a Canada-wide program that has stability," Friendly said.

"A system of universal, high-quality child care is also in the national interest, and requires the federal government to provide the necessary glue," she added.

James, a former Greater Victoria School Board trustee and B.C. director of child care policy before she was elected as an MLA in 2005, says her province is resolved to keep pushing.

"I'm very passionate about this issue. I've worked a lot of my life in this field. And I know the impact," she said. "Raising kids is stressful enough ... Parents shouldn't have to worry day to day about their child care situation."

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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