

Quebec election: Daycare promises won't be broken again, Couillard says ^[1]

The Liberal leader says Quebec has set aside \$8 billion to run social programs at the same level if there is a downturn in the economy.

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SHERBROOKE — As he visited a children's play centre to talk about his promises for young families, Liberal Leader Philippe Couillard had to defend campaign pledges he broke nearly four years ago.

In the last campaign, Couillard had promised to freeze daycare fees, but he then changed his tune when in office, introducing a sliding scale whereby parents pay between \$8 and \$22 per day, based on family income, meaning many parents pay thousands more annually.

Couillard justified the hikes on Tuesday saying his government had to make difficult choices to balance the budget, but daycare remains affordable — with 60 per cent of families paying less than \$9 per day — and Quebec has the lowest childcare costs in the country.

"When we came in, we faced a \$7-billion shortfall and an immediate threat of a credit rating downgrade," he said. "It was difficult, but we had to achieve that to protect our public services. We achieved social justice and a better distribution of the burden."

He said his government has set aside \$8 billion to run social programs at the same level if there is a downturn in the economy, so he can assure Quebecers he won't have to break his promises because of a financial shortfall.

Couillard's reiterated pledges for families he made in the first week of the campaign, which include free daycare or pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds, a child allowance of between \$150 and \$300 per child, free dental care until the age of 16 and free public transit for full-time students. On Tuesday, he added a pledge to increase the tax credit for first-time homebuyers to \$1,000 from \$750 help defray the cost of the onerous duty imposed on new homes known as the welcome tax.

But during a news conference, Couillard steered his answers toward attacks on the credibility and the transparency of his chief rival.

Couillard called Legault an accountant who doesn't seem to understand the economy, saying the Coalition Avenir Québec leader is in denial of Quebec's labour shortage, and has not properly explained many of his policies, including how he will pay for thousands of new classrooms that would have to be built to fulfill the CAQ's pledge of free pre-kindergarten for all 4-year-olds.

Legault's pledge to reduce the annual number of immigrants by 20 per cent and submit new arrivals to values and language tests also took a battering, with Couillard saying that in the Oct. 1 vote, Quebecers will roundly denounce a party that advocates closing its doors.

The Liberal Party has pledged to keep immigration levels the same, but to give priority to people who wish to settle in the far-flung regions, where the labour shortages are the most acute.

Couillard added that Legault has decided to travel far from urban centres and log long hours on the bus to avoid questions from journalists and denounced Legault's decision to refuse all requests to meet with the editorial boards of newspapers.

"I have met them all, including the Montreal Gazette," Couillard said. "He has refused all of them. That should tell you something."

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