

Liberals told to rethink child care policy to claim to be 'feminist government'^[1]

Author: Press, Jordan

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's efforts to run a feminist government should take an extra step to create a universal daycare system, and prevent the funding from being lost in electoral politics, says a leading expert.

The federal treasury is set to spend \$7.5 billion over a decade to help fund child-care spaces across the country.

Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos was scheduled to be in Hamilton on Wednesday to talk about the Liberals' child care commitment, which over the first three years will cost \$1.3 billion and potentially create or maintain 40,000 subsidized spaces nationally.

The Liberals have often talked about being a "feminist government," and while they have taken steps towards that goal, they should consider quickly doing more toward a universal system that could boost women's participation in the labour force, Brock University's Kate Bezanson argues in a paper published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Law and Equality*.

Bezanson, an expert on feminist policy and chair of Brock's sociology department, said in an interview there is a disconnect between the scope of policies the Liberals have enacted, particularly on child care spending and new parental leave policies, and the aspirational talk about the gender equality.

In some cases, government policy seems at times to replicate those of the previous Conservative government, which the Liberals frequently criticize.

"That disconnect ... is notable for a government that is taking a lot of really important feminist steps," Bezanson said.

Child care and parental leave may be expensive, she said, but they "also the yield the biggest results and those have been more lightly pressed than we would have imagined from a government that understands itself as a feminist government."

Her paper also touches on concerns that long-term child care funding could be undone after this fall's election if the Liberals don't enshrine the spending into law — which the Liberals plan to do with the \$40-billion national housing strategy — so whichever party is elected can't cancel it.

Promises of transfers to the provinces are only good for three years, after which new funding deals must be signed.

This election year has already started out with questions about the long-term outlook of federal finances, which the Finance Department projects will remain in deficit for about 21 years, not including any new spending. That makes it difficult to commit to any major increases in spending, Bezanson said, noting that child care is often where funding is neglected.

Child care groups interested in seeing the Liberals boost their spending commitments have come away from talks with the view that the government won't unveil any new measures in the 2019 budget.

Internal government documents provide a window into the Liberals' efforts to walk their feminist talk, with a universal child care system noted as a best practice internationally and domestically for feminist governments.

The presentations from the fall of 2017, crafted by a group of civil servants overseeing work on feminist policies, singled out countries such as Sweden and Norway, as well as Quebec's daycare system, as key contributors to increasing the number of women in the workforce and broader gender equality. The documents were obtained by The Canadian Press under the federal access-to-information law.

In Quebec, the labour force participation of parents with young children has increased faster than in the rest of the country since the introduction of its subsidized system in 1997. Had women and men participated equally in the labour force nationally in 2016, shortly after the Liberals took office, the government estimated that 880,000 more women would have been working that year.

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