

Braid: NDP child care plan shows vast gap with UCP policy ^[1]

With yet another spending announcement in Calgary, the NDP continues its drive to win middle-class votes away from the UCP.

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EXCERPTS

Rachel Notley's party has made more than \$2 billion in local promises in the past couple of weeks.

This one's another whopper — a plan for virtually universal Alberta child care capped at \$25 a day, along with the creation of 13,000 new child care spaces.

The NDP has been working up to this with a pilot project that now covers 7,300 of the 62,000 spaces in the province.

The full deal was always likely to be one of the NDP's biggest campaign promises. And here it is.

Notley says the subsidy program would cost \$60 million the first year.

By the time it's fully ramped up in 2023-24, annual spending would be \$500 million. Full cost over the five-year period is \$1.5 billion.

The UCP quickly responded: "this \$1.5 billion in new spending will come from increasing the province's deficit, dragging us deeper into the NDP's \$100 billion deficit hole."

Jason Kenney's party promises to maintain current child care supports and create new spaces by cutting red tape on operators, "while not jeopardizing safety."

The NDP would not only offer a cap of \$25 a day on every space in daycares and family day homes but enhance training and provide for flexible hours, including evening and weekend care.

The word "offer" is intentional. Participation would not be mandatory for the child care centres.

"We won't force providers to enter this program if they don't want to, but based on our pilot project, we expect that the overwhelming majority of providers will want to," says NDP spokeswoman Cheryl Oates.

There are reasons this was announced in Calgary, beyond the obvious fact the NDP needs to win a block of seats here.

First, the median monthly fee for child care in Calgary is \$1,015, compared to \$835 in Edmonton.

Second, Calgary's gap between women and men in the workforce is huge — nearly 10 percent.

In the province at large, the participation rate is higher but hardly stellar.

Alberta's employment participation for women with children under age six is 70 percent, ninth in the country, according to StatsCan data posted by economist Trevor Tombe,

Only Manitoba, with 69 percent, is lower. Quebec and New Brunswick are highest at 80 percent.

Quebec instituted subsidized child care in the 1980s. Both women's employment and provincial GDP rose more than 1.5 percent.

There's a clear link between affordable child care and a higher percentage of women in the workplace. More women at work means higher economic productivity and growth.

Those things are generally true. But the question is whether voters will see this as a major social benefit and economic driver, or just another expense the province can't afford.

UCP policy focuses on quicker fixes, usually by lowering costs and cutting or holding the line on spending.

On Monday, Kenney rolled out an education policy that promises to "maintain or increase" annual funding, while finding savings in administration.

The UCP also says it will "continue to build new schools," without saying how many or how quickly.

Much of the policy is devoted to curriculum reform, including an end to “discovery” or “inquiry” learning, and a return to the Grade 3 provincial achievement test.

On LGBTQ rights, Kenney wants to revert to the days of the PC’s Bill 10, which was considered a victory in 2015 but didn’t go nearly as far as the NDP has since, by extending protections and standards to private religious schools.

Kenney did say that teaching kids about consent would be part of the sex education program. He let this slip before it was due for announcement, apparently. Early or late, it’s good news.

The UCP is trying to show it can constrain spending without cutting services. The New Democrats plan more spending on services they believe will bring economic growth.

Both cases are hard to prove without a lot more detail from the parties — and that’s about all they have in common.

In my experience of Alberta elections going back to 1979, two strong contenders have never offered more radically different and irreconcilable visions of how to build this province.

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