

# Choice: a slippery word in the Ford government's hands <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Toronto Star

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 14 Apr 2019

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## EXCERPTS

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

That Lewis Carroll passage may have been published nearly 150 years ago but it's as sharp and relevant as ever. Indeed, it could well have been written for Premier Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government and its first budget tabled last week.

Ontario will give drinkers more "choice."

It will give parents more "choice" in child care.

In the case of alcohol, choice means more of what people want, whether they need it or not. In the case of child care, choice actually means less of what they want and need.

But clearly Ford and his ministers might as well be up on the wall with Humpty Dumpty, insisting that a word like "choice" means just whatever they choose it to mean. Neither more nor less.

The budget also vows to pursue more "opportunities" for improvements in gambling and how the provincial gas tax is shared with municipalities.

And again, what this really means is more gambling — everything from online gambling to single event sports betting is on the table — and less gas tax for municipalities.

Toronto alone has lost \$1.1 billion of TTC funding over 10 years to this wonderful new opportunity to remain at two cents a litre rather than rising, as planned, to four cents.

Clearly opportunity, like choice, is a slippery beast in the hands of the Ford government.

At first glance, the amount of attention the government gave to alcohol — making it easier and cheaper to buy and opening up new public spaces to drinking — seems well over the top, given the other far more important matters a provincial budget must cover.

But for Ford, it's about far more than just loosening regulations around drinking. It's code for saying that Ontario is not a nanny state, it trusts you to do what you want and, as the government says, "make responsible choices."

The government is keen to extend that thinking to child care. But here it's nothing more than an excuse to avoid government actions that are necessary to create the affordable child care system parents desperately need and will help drive Ontario's economy into the future.

"We're putting more money in parents' pockets by giving them choice," says Education Minister Lisa Thompson.

The government's new child-care tax credit essentially slips \$1,250 into the average eligible family's pocket for any type of child care from babysitting to summer camp to daily daycare.

But here's the thing: hiring the teenager next door is already a choice parents can make. This tax credit just gives some of them a little extra money to pay for it. It's welcome, no doubt.

But it does not make regulated child care — the thing that many parents put their kids on waiting lists for before they're even born — any more of a choice than it was before. It neither creates an affordable child-care system nor does it provide anywhere near enough money to pay for a spot, assuming a family can even find one.

The average tax credit would cover a toddler space for a little more than month in the cheapest market in Ontario and less than a month in Toronto, the most expensive.

The government isn't respecting parental choice, it's abdicating responsibility to create the robust child care system Ontario's families and economy need. This tax credit replaces the previous Liberal government's plan to make child care for preschoolers free; those who point out what a terrible trade-off that is are attacked for being "against choice."

**Related link:** Protecting what matters most: 2019 Ontario budget <sup>[3]</sup>

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