

Child care is the missing piece in Jason Kenney's plan to get Alberta back to work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There is a hole in the United Conservative Party's plan to get the province of Alberta back to work. It has less to do with pipeline projects, the price of natural gas and corporate tax cuts. It has more to do with diapers, nap time and Play-Doh.

A plan for child care is still the missing economic piece.

I have never heard Premier Jason Kenney utter the words "child care" in relation to his role as UCP Leader or Premier of Alberta. It's not in his government's last Throne Speech. Mr. Kenney hasn't used any of his substantial political capital to talk about his government's vision on this topic.

That's why the current uncertainty around the \$25-a-day plan for child care, a pilot project created by the former NDP government, is disheartening. Even if you don't believe the program is the be-all and end-all, there are many parents in limbo right now - unsure of what the UCP government will do next, and whether the current office-holder will put any priority on affordable child care for the masses. (The NDP's program also helped get prekindergarten children whose parents might not be able to pay for preschool into a strong educational setting, early on.)

The first tranche of the pilot project was set to wind up this April. Another portion will end in March, 2021. But Alberta Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz announced her department would extend the program spots set to end this April for an additional two months. She said the extension means a smooth transition to the summer, while the province works on a new child-care plan and bilateral funding agreement with Ottawa.

There has been no final word on whether \$25-a-day child care in Alberta is done, and Ms. Schulz says she is still reviewing data from the program. But it's pretty clear she isn't a fan.

She tweeted at the NDP this week that "Albertans didn't vote for your \$25/day Quebec-style child care plan."

The NDP's plan, as laid out in last April's election, was to make all of the province's 62,000 child-care spots subsidized, and to add thousands more. This would have cost \$1.5-billion over five years.

But in an interview, Ms. Schulz said instead Albertans overwhelmingly supported her party's laser-like focus on jobs, the economy and fiscal restraint for provincial spending.

"I'm really not sure how they [the NDP] planned to fund universal child care. Because we also can't create more debt, because that has an impact on jobs, investment and opportunities for working parents."

An \$8-million child-care subsidy for low-income families will continue. But Ms. Schulz is also concerned there was no means testing attached to the \$25-a-day pilot programs. The minister said some of the families can clearly afford more.

But the UCP might be wise to pay attention to data that show universal child-care plans are a boost to economies. On the other side of the legislature, NDP critic Rakhi Pancholi points to data that show Quebec's famous program - where parents now pay \$8.25 a day, for each child, no matter their income - has increased the labour participation rate for women, and increased employment and GDP growth.

You get more than you put in," she said.

Ms. Pancholi said the program introduced by the NDP was never meant to be means-tested, it was meant to be inclusive.

She added, too, that child care affects all working parents but ultimately ends up affecting women more, as they are far most likely to leave the work force to stay home with children.

Realistically, the UCP government is never going to back a full-on Quebec-style program. The cost for financially strained Alberta is significant. And a program with zero means-test doesn't fit with the UCP political philosophy that parents should have the widest variety

of choice when it comes to child care, but likely have to pay for at least part of it themselves. But they have to recognize a strong provincial child-care program could help attract and keep workers in the province as it crawls out of its economic doldrums. The days of plentiful high-wage jobs in oil and gas, finance and construction - where many Alberta families could thrive on one household income, mostly a man's - are gone.

And Mr. Kenney has long made attracting women to his party, both as supporters and candidates, a priority. His government would be remiss to ignore the clear economic benefits of a program that helps women get into, and stay in, the labour force, whether they are low or middle-income.

For working single parents and dual-earner families, child care is a requirement for having a job. The province needs a widely available, affordable, quality program to fill the vacuum when the \$25-a-day pilot is officially terminated.

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