

History suggests Justin Trudeau's national child care proposal is already doomed. Could Doug Ford be its saviour? ^[1]

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Source: The Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 27 Sep 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Repeating the same behaviour usually leads to the same outcome. If that maxim were to hold true in the case of the latest federal bid to preside over the creation of a national child-care program, the project could be dead on arrival.

Here is why:

It is not a lack of federal interest that accounts for Canada's patchwork approach to child-care and early childhood education.

Since the mid-eighties, every prime minister — with the notable exception of Stephen Harper — has, at one time or another, had child-care on the agenda.

Over Brian Mulroney's first term, legislation to implement the embryo of a program was actually passed in the House of Commons. It died in the Senate in the lead-up to the 1988 election and was not resuscitated afterwards.

A national child-care program figured prominently in Jean Chrétien's 1993 platform, the Liberal Red Book. It subsequently became a casualty of the drive to eliminate the federal deficit.

On Paul Martin's brief watch as prime minister, bilateral agreements were negotiated with the provinces. Those did not survive the 2006 Liberal defeat and the election of a Conservative government.

But while one can criticize the successive federal governments that did not follow through on their promises for a deficit of attention, their collective failure to bring the project of a national program to fruition is really rooted in a systemic lack of provincial political will.

That dearth predates the arrival at the first ministers' table of a majority of Conservative premiers. It is not primarily grounded in ideology.

Take Ontario. The Liberals were in power at Queen's Park from 2003 until 2018, giving them 15 years to set up a child-care system along the lines of the Quebec model.

When Dalton McGuinty became premier, the \$5-a-day Quebec plan had been up and running for six years. In progressive public policy circles, it was hailed as a groundbreaking initiative.

Or take British Columbia. The province's incumbent NDP government came to power three years ago on the promise of a \$10-a-day child-care plan, but it has been reluctant to disburse the considerable sums required to deliver more than a modest supply of affordable places.

The Quebec model was developed without federal help, at a time when the province was otherwise working all out to balance its books.

Then-premier Lucien Bouchard wanted to demonstrate that eliminating the deficit need not be achieved at the expense of a government's social policy ambitions.

The Parti Québécois also sought to have something other than fiscal restraint (and sovereignty) to put in the window of its first post-referendum re-election campaign.

It was over that same period that the province's public pharmacare program was created.

The Quebec child-care template has been in place for more than two decades. If Quebec has demonstrated anything over that period, it is that it is possible — even in fiscally challenging times — for a province to create and operate a comprehensive child-care system without Ottawa's help.

But the reverse is not. When it comes to daycare and early childhood education, provincial leadership is an essential ingredient for which there is no federal substitute.

With the country's governments swimming in red ink, whether that leadership will be on hand going forward is not a given.

The concept of a comprehensive child-care and early learning system has gained quite a bit of traction since Quebec pioneered its plan 23 years ago.

Over that time, support has spread from academia to corporate Canada. This week, the renewed federal commitment to an ambitious national child-care strategy earned it praise from business leaders.

The pandemic and its dire impact on women's participation in the workforce have given the file more impetus than at any other time in recent history.

Based on Wednesday's throne speech, Justin Trudeau and his team believe there is now an iron to be struck while it is hot.

The current Liberal government could prove more persistent in its efforts to bring provinces on board than its predecessors.

Back in the late nineties, Quebec would not have broken the ground it did on the child-care front had it not been for the presence of a critical mass of influential female ministers at the cabinet table.

Trudeau's cabinet similarly boasts a sizable number of women who are liable to hold their government's feet to the fire, starting with Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland.

And as it happens, Freeland and Premier Doug Ford have struck an improbable political friendship.

Who knows? Ford could be as instrumental in securing a more productive outcome to the latest round of child-care politics as the billions of dollars Ottawa (again) promises to put on the table.

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