

Deliver on national child-care this time, please ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Toronto Star - Once again, Canadian women are being told they're on the cusp of a national child-care system that will provide them with affordable quality child care no matter where they live.

And, once again, they're being told it's coming for all the right reasons.

Women can't fully participate in the workforce without access to affordable child care and that doesn't just hurt women and their families, it holds back the entire economy. Add in the COVID-induced she-cession, which has driven women's hard-won workforce gains back decades, and it's all the more vital to eliminate this longstanding barrier.

"Budget 2021," the Trudeau government said in its fall economic statement, "will outline a plan to provide affordable, accessible and high-quality child care from ocean to ocean to ocean."

Child care promises, especially ones with delivery dates sometime in the future, are hardly new to Canadian women. But Chrystia Freeland, the deputy prime minister and finance minister, seems to be making this one personal.

"I say this both as a working mother, and as a minister of finance: Canada will not be truly competitive until all Canadian women have access to the affordable child care we need to support our participation in our country's workforce," she said in her speech on Monday.

There were references to generations of disappointments that governments have not acted and hints that the federal plan will be modelled on Quebec's highly subsidized system — long the holy grail of affordable child care in Canada.

This was not the same weak brew put out just a few months ago by former finance minister Bill Morneau in the government's August update. Then, the government said, "the lack of child care services could delay women's return to work" and "we are proposing to invest in a safe, sufficient and adequate supply of child care."

Since then, the government seems to have thought more seriously about it and Freeland's statements are clearly intended to come across as more heartfelt.

Ultimately, though, will that make a difference? Will it mean ribbon cuttings on new and expanded child-care centres across the country?

Women will be watching and desperately hoping that, this time, the government is committed enough to stay the course through the contentious negotiations with provinces that will be required and manages to stay in power long enough to pull it off.

After all, Canadians been here before with a government laying out all the good reasons to provide child care. And yet, outside Quebec and a few pockets here and there, finding regulated affordable child care is akin to running into an animal on the endangered species list.

In big cities like Toronto, parents put their children on daycare wait lists long before they're ready to attend — sometimes even before they're born. And, if they're lucky enough to get a spot, most families can look forward to paying the equivalent of a sizable monthly mortgage.

It shouldn't be this way. Not in 2020.

Indeed, the fiscal update points to the landmark Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, which called on the federal and provincial governments in 1970 to roll out a national child-care system.

Monday is the 50th anniversary of that report — and we're still talking about doing what it called for all those decades ago.

Just to bring home how very long ago that was, the commission's report took time to note, among other things, the role of modern appliances in changing "a housewife's day."

Yet, even then, the need for national child care was clearly understood. "The equality of women means little without such a program," said the report.

And the role that government must play in building that system and subsidizing its operating costs so child care is affordable to families

was also well understood: “Private initiative cannot cope with so large a problem. Governments must assume the major responsibility.”

Earlier this fall, Scotiabank economists suggested a national version of what Quebec has would cost \$11.5 billion a year.

It looks like a big upfront expenditure. But a new report from the Centre for Future Work estimates that cost would be more than offset by the \$17 billion to \$29 billion per year federal and provincial governments would gain in new revenues as parents increase their workforce participation.

For now, all the Trudeau government has put up for a national child-care system is a down payment and a promise that the real deal will be in its next budget, expected in spring 2021.

The down payment includes \$420 million to help provinces train and retain qualified early-childhood educators and \$20 million over five years to fund a secretariat to craft its national “child care vision.”

“I’m really ready to put my shoulder to the wheel on this one,” Freeland said this week.

Let’s hope so because there’s a long way still to go from the government’s down payment to actually opening affordable child-care spaces across the country. It can’t come soon enough for women — and the Canadian economy.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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