

Liberals about to kick-start talks on new child-care system and funding, Hussen says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Two key federal cabinet ministers marked the anniversary of a landmark report on women's issues in Canada with a political push for a national daycare system, encouraging provinces and MPs to not stand in the way of the revived promise.

It was 50 years ago Monday that the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada released its final report, which called on all levels of government to immediately start work on national child-care system.

The Liberals, who promised a universal daycare system on the campaign trail in 1993, have once again pledged to deliver on that goal. The Liberals put some money toward that end in the fall economic statement tabled late last month, but getting there will take time and negotiations with provinces about the fine details of how a program would look.

Families Minister Ahmed Hussen said in an interview Monday that the Liberals would be as "accommodating as possible" during what he agreed could be challenging talks.

He argued that provincial and federal politicians should be onside with the essence of what the government wants to put in place — the federal New Democrats in particular.

The Liberals have long sought to pin blame on the NDP for siding with other opposition parties to bring down the minority Paul Martin government in 2005, which ended talks towards a national child-care system at the time.

"Ultimately, it's about the kids and it's about the parents so that they can go back to work and have access to truly affordable child care, because that's the biggest pressure on all levels of government," Hussen said.

He added that "politicians in this country need to support this effort."

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland delivered a similar message Monday during an appearance on CTV talk show *The Social*, as the Liberals vie for public backing for a plan they have yet to fully form.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh said the Liberals need to look in the mirror to find someone to blame for why the country still lacks universal child care.

"They've had the ability and the time to bring in place universal child care and they simply have not done it," Singh said Monday on Parliament Hill.

"Right now, they're not showing a commitment to universal child care. They're not even showing a commitment to keeping the existing level of child care. Let that be very clear."

Child-care experts suggest a national system could take years to create, including building new infrastructure to accommodate the more than two million spaces that are estimated to be needed for widespread coverage, and training new staff.

Freeland acknowledged a longer time frame when asked about a five-year spend on a child-care secretariat to build policy capacity inside the federal government.

"It's going to take time," Freeland said in the television interview.

"I'm not going to promise instant results. That's impossible and would be dishonest."

The Liberals have promised \$420 million to train and retain early childhood educators, the specifics of which will be subject to negotiations with provinces, Hussen said.

That would mean provincial needs would determine how many staff get retained through wage increases, or students trained through the help of bursaries.

Talks will start over the coming months on how that money will be used while at the same time negotiations push ahead on funding arrangements set to expire in March for existing child-care dollars.

"We have to do two things: continue the current supports through and beyond COVID, but on a parallel track, negotiate and try to establish this national system as early as possible," Hussen said.

Hussen suggested the current agreements could be used as a platform for a national system, including expectations for how provinces report on spending, how the money can be used and the number of spaces protected or created.

Accountability in a national system would follow the same lines, "if not introduce even more expectations of higher levels of accountability," he said.

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