

# Freeland says COVID-19 has created a 'window of opportunity' to launch national child-care program <sup>[1]</sup>

With many women out of work, finance minister says now is the time to build a national child-care system

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## EXCERPTS

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said late Thursday that building a nationwide early learning and child-care system will be at the centre of the Liberal government's COVID-19 recovery plan, saying "now is the moment" for Canada to fulfill a promise long made to parents.

Speaking with former Liberal cabinet minister Ken Dryden during a "fireside chat" at the party's policy convention, Freeland said she is seized with the issue given the "incredibly dangerous" decline in female workforce participation over the last year.

While successive Liberal leaders have vowed to overhaul the country's child-care regime only to retreat when in government, Freeland said the political equation has changed amid the upheaval created by the pandemic.

"I really believe COVID has created a window of political opportunity and maybe an epiphany on the importance of early learning and child care," Freeland said.

Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost since the onset of the pandemic and many of those are in hard-hit sectors like hospitality, retail and food — industries that are dominated by women workers.

A recent analysis from RBC found almost half a million Canadian women who lost their jobs during the pandemic hadn't returned to work as of January. Employment among women in Canada who earned less than \$800 a week has fallen almost 30 per cent, the bank found.

Nearly 100,000 working-age Canadian women have completely left the workforce altogether since the pandemic started, which means they aren't even looking for a new job.

"A lot of people who didn't have to worry about early learning and child care, now COVID has brought it into their lives and I think that creates a real opportunity for us," Freeland said.

"Now is the moment that Canada needs to get this done, we need to build this for the women of today."

Freeland, who will table a federal budget later this month, said a low-cost child-care system like the one already in place in Quebec, where parents pay a flat-rate of \$10 a day per child, will create good-paying jobs and drive economic growth by allowing more women to work after giving birth.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said Canada will "build back better" after COVID-19, a virus that has ravaged social and economic life in this country. To help in that effort, Liberal Party members have convened online for a three-day virtual policy meeting to gather ideas for an upcoming election platform.

Delegates will debate ideas like a universal basic income, high-speed rail and a "just transition" for energy workers affected by the shift to cleaner fuel sources, among other proposals.

## 'Heartbreaking' delays

Dryden, who served as minister of social development under former prime minister Paul Martin, led an effort in 2004-06 to build a national child-care system like the one that is now being contemplated by Trudeau and his cabinet.

Dryden secured some \$5 billion over five years to start building a universal child-care regime — a program designed to offer low-cost care for the children of working parents.

That plan was derailed after the Liberals lost the 2006 election. The subsequent Conservative government went a different route, sending monthly cheques directly to parents to help offset the cost of care.

Freeland said it was "heartbreaking" to review Dryden's plan some 15 years later, saying such a program would have helped the many mothers who were forced to choose between looking for a job and caring for a child during this pandemic.

While promising some sort of child-care plan, Freeland told Dryden that there's "anxiety" within government about creating such a complex program in a relatively short timeframe.

Dryden said such a system — which, given constitutional considerations, will require buy-in from the provinces — will take years to build and will go through many iterations before a fully functioning national network would be in place. Despite the hurdles, he said starting that work now is necessary to give Canadian children "a great, great start in life."

Last November, in the fall economic update, Freeland laid out the first steps in a multi-year plan to build a Canada-wide child-care system.

The government has since created a new federal secretariat on early learning and child care to work with the provinces and territories to design a new national system.

Freeland has promised the next federal budget would present a more concrete plan on how Ottawa will provide "affordable, accessible, inclusive and high-quality child care from coast to coast to coast."

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** economic recovery <sup>[4]</sup>

women's labour force participation <sup>[5]</sup>

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