

Trudeau champions child care ahead of federal budget ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau continued Friday to raise expectations that the coming budget will place a significant focus on child care, a day after Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland told the Liberal Party convention that the moment has come to create a long-lasting child-care system.

“Child care is something we need to do as a country,” Mr. Trudeau told reporters at a press conference in Ottawa.

“[It] is not simply a social argument, or a social program, it’s fundamentally an economic program,” he said, adding that the business community “across the country has spoken up clearly and strongly in support.”

In her Thursday remarks, Ms. Freeland said Quebec has shown the way on successful child-care programs. The province’s subsidized system charges parents less than \$10 a day.

Ms. Freeland and Mr. Trudeau did not give specifics on what a federal program would look like.

The federal government will table its first budget in more than two years on April 19. Since Ms. Freeland took over the finance portfolio in August, the government has signalled its plan to make child care a bigger priority. Her November economic update promised to “lay the groundwork for a Canada-wide child care system.”

The Liberals are also preparing for a possible election campaign that could come this year. On Friday the party announced the campaign co-chairs for the next election are Economic Development Minister Mélanie Joly and MP Navdeep Bains. As well, much of the party’s convention this week has focused on election readiness, including training on digital campaigning, fundraising and navigating tight races.

“We don’t know when the next election is going to be, but it’s coming, and this convention is our chance to get ready,” party president Suzanne Cowan said in opening remarks at the virtual convention on Thursday night.

If Canadians are sent to the polls soon, it likely will be because the Prime Minister has pulled the plug on his own government. The Liberals only need the support of one of the three main opposition parties to continue governing and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh has said his party will vote with the government on confidence votes and he “will not trigger an election while we are fighting this pandemic.” Mr. Trudeau has not made the same commitment but maintains a campaign is not his focus.

“Opposition parties and parliamentary journalists spend a lot of time thinking about elections. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about elections. My priority is COVID-19,” Mr. Trudeau told reporters in March.

The first federal budget in more than two years will detail just how high the deficit and debt have climbed during the COVID-19 pandemic and is expected to indicate how the Liberals will spend as much as \$100-billion more in stimulus spending.

The budget is also expected to provide details of the government’s plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050 and surpass its 2030 emissions reduction goals. But Ms. Freeland did not mention either stimulus spending or green programs in her Thursday remarks and focused almost exclusively on child care.

“Now is the moment that Canada needs to get this done; that we need to build for the women of today and the parents of today,” Ms. Freeland told the virtual convention on Thursday night.

She said the focus now should be on “building a system that lasts” rather than a program that can more easily be cancelled.

“I really believe COVID has created a window of political opportunity ... on the importance of early learning and child care,” Ms. Freeland said.

Mr. Trudeau will address the convention on Saturday afternoon.

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