

Attempts to build national child care have failed for 50 years. Could this time be different? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The history of pledges to build a national child-care system run back half a century. So do the failures. Each decade offered promise, reliably sunk on the shoals of politics and economics.

In the House of Commons on Monday, when Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland presented her first budget, with national child care as its centrepiece, she nodded to the discordant history.

Ms. Freeland was two years old in 1970 when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women delivered its report, child care among its urgings.

"This time," she declared, "we're going to do it."

The thorny politics of child care - and fears over the size of the bill - scuttled all previous efforts. The same factors are still in play. However, a brief review of past failures illuminates why this time may, in fact, be different.

Back in 1971, after the Status of Women report, a Liberal government tabled tax reform. It included tax-deductible child-care expenses, marking a first, modest step. A bigger push came in the 1980s. A task force, started by the Liberals and concluded under the Progressive Conservatives, called for a national child-care system. But Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's government instead decided to offer more tax breaks, along with funding of for-profit care. The whole scheme died with the 1988 election.

In 1993, child care was a Liberal promise; it disappeared in the following years of budget cuts. In 2005, Liberal Paul Martin persuaded the provinces to sign on to a five-year, \$5-billion plan; it fell by the wayside when Stephen Harper won election in 2006. His government instead introduced grants for parents. Justin Trudeau's Liberals reformed and increased those payments to parents, under the Canada Child Benefit. Liberal steps on child care were much more modest, offering \$7-billion to the provinces - over 10 years.

The times and the politicians may have changed but the turning points of the debate remain the same: how much money is to be spent and where it is to be sent - to parents directly (as Conservatives have tended to prefer), or to subsidize a public system (the Liberal preference, but which they've never offered enough cash to realize).

Child care in most of Canada today is more expensive than a year of university tuition; the Liberals want to get average costs of \$50-plus a day down to \$10. The model is Quebec and the argument is that taking it national will spark economic gains, starting with more women in the work force. As this page discussed on Thursday, the evidence is promising.

More politics: The Liberals believe in regulated operators of early learning and child care; the Conservatives decry "Ottawa-knows-best." The Conservatives are right that flexibility can be a virtue, but years of direct grants to parents have not reduced high child-care costs. A government role, at the very least in regulating conditions and prices, seems necessary.

But the biggest political challenge is federal-provincial.

Ottawa hopes to shape provincial programs with an offer of money. And money can do a lot of convincing. Some provinces don't have expanding child care on their wish list, but others do. In British Columbia, the NDP promised \$10 a day child care in 2017, yet have made only modest progress. But by 2025, Ottawa could be sending B.C. more than \$1-billion a year - more than doubling planned provincial spending.

As for Quebec, it could be in for a windfall, if the federal offer involves partly funding a program that already exists, and that the province is already paying for.

Then there are, of course, the usual grinding gears of the political cycle.

Mr. Mulroney's plan died on the order paper ahead of the 1988 vote; Mr. Martin's 2005 plan disappeared after he lost the 2006 election. Today's child-care proposal also lands before an imminent (maybe) election.

Shifting most child-care costs from parents to taxpayers will not be cheap fiscally; getting all provinces on board will not be easy politically. The dividends, however, look to be significant, for women, children and the economy. Ottawa's promise of money is big - maybe big enough to overcome the obstacles.

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