

# Ottawa's squeeze play to get all provinces into its child-care plan

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Justin Trudeau's government has put \$30-billion toward creating a national child-care program, but the trick now is not going back to 2005.

That was the year previous a Liberal government, under Paul Martin, tried to construct a coast-to-coast child-care program but got bogged down in a political fight over whether it is better to fund daycares or send money straight to parents.

Mr. Martin's government lost that debate, or at least it lost the election of early 2006, and Stephen Harper's Conservatives killed the child-care agreements and started sending out child benefit cheques.

Now another Liberal government is trying it with more money, and some opponents are gearing up to make the same case, using the kind of language Mr. Harper's Tories did 15 years ago to dismiss the value of daycare programs.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney criticized the federal initiative, saying it is "only for a kind of cookie-cutter, nine-to-five, urban, government and union-run institutional daycare options."

That means that even with all that money on offer, Mr. Trudeau's Liberals are going to need a political strategy to succeed. Child care is provincial jurisdiction, so they need to get premiers such as Mr. Kenney on board.

Ahmed Hussen, the federal Minister for Families, Children, and Social Development, is promising good-faith negotiations. In an interview, he noted that none of the provinces expressed "outright opposition" to a Canada-wide child-care system, and they simply say they want flexibility. "I have no problem with that," Mr. Hussen said.

But provinces have a different idea of what flexibility means. Several will want their costs for child-care tax credits to count toward their share of child-care programs. Mr. Kenney's statements suggest he'd rather send cheques to parents. That's not what Ottawa has in mind.

"We intend to build a Canada-wide system that delivers deep affordability to parents, but also ensures high quality and accessibility and inclusivity," Mr. Hussen said.

constituents wondering if they will missed out.

That kind of coercive use of the federal spending power in provincial jurisdiction has galled provinces for years. But the consensus legal view is that Ottawa faces few constraints, said University of British Columbia law professor Hoi Kong- and those who disagree haven't mounted a successful challenge in the courts.

Some premiers, such as British Columbia's John Horgan, have already promised an expansion of subsidized child care to their residents – so the feds will effectively be paying for their promises. They are in a rush to sign up.

Ottawa is offering to foot most of the bill. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland's budget called for 50-50 cost-sharing of the child-care initiative with provinces, but that means that Ottawa will put in almost all of the new money over the next five years, \$27.2-billion.

Quebec isn't likely to hold out against the federal intrusion into provincial jurisdiction; its child-care program already meets most of the conditions, so it will effectively be offered a pile of cash for things it already does.

So Ottawa can strike deals with some provinces while others hold out. That could be Ontario. Or Saskatchewan. Very likely, Mr. Kenney's Alberta.

Of course, they could tell Mr. Trudeau that child care is provincial jurisdiction, and he can get lost. But outside of Quebec, Canadians don't seem to care much for that argument. Their constituents might just ask why they are refusing to accept federal cash.

Mr. Trudeau's Liberals know that's their main political weapon: the political pressure that holdout premiers will face from their own constituents.

The April budget slipped in an interesting goal: cutting daycare fees by 50 per cent in all provinces except Quebec by the end of 2022. Does

Ontario Premier Doug Ford want to explain to suburban parents he's refusing federal cash to lower their fees, when next year is an election year?

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

**Tags:** federal budget <sup>[4]</sup>

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