

# Stephen Harper won an election while arguing against a national child-care plan. Can Erin O'Toole do the same? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

OTTAWA—For the Conservatives, it's all about "choices."

That's been the party line on federal help for Canadian parents facing ever-increasing child-care costs. It was the argument behind Stephen Harper axing the Liberals' 2005 attempt at a national child-care program, and for instead sending monthly cheques to parents.

It's the argument Erin O'Toole is dusting off to oppose the Liberal government's \$30 billion pledge to establish a national child-care program.

Those close to O'Toole see echoes of the 2005 debate today and are betting parents will prefer more immediate, direct support rather than the Liberals' national program.

"All of the research we have shows that parents still prefer to receive a child-care benefit directly and maintain discretion over how it's spent," said one senior Conservative, who agreed to discuss the party's strategy on the condition they not be named.

"A one-size fits all approach won't appeal to middle-class voters — especially new Canadians. They have many, many options — daycare, nursery school, relatives, nannies."

"(The Liberal plan) isn't a play for 'middle class' voters. It's a play for progressive voters."

But it also could be a play for voters in Canada's largest cities — outside Quebec, which heavily subsidizes daycare — where child-care costs are highest.

The Liberal plan, unveiled as the centrepiece of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland's COVID-19-recovery budget, commits \$30 billion over five years to create more non-profit daycare spaces, hire more early learning and child-care workers, and bring fees down to \$10-a-day by 2026.

A national plan has long been a goal for Liberals, but Freeland recast it as an imperative for rebuilding after COVID-19's economic damage — which has disproportionately affected women.

"I remember how hard that was for my mother, who was just determined to work as a lawyer even though she had two little children. She would sometimes take us to court," Freeland told the Star's Heather Scofield last week.

"So to me, it's very personal, very important to get early learning and child care done. And what I am excited about is, I feel now there is an opportunity, a political opportunity in Canada to take what has been really a feminist campaign for more than 50 years, and actually accomplish it."

The Conservatives aren't "showing their cards" on their child-care plans at this time, the source said. But Raquel Dancho, the party's critic for future workforce development, said the party generally prefers direct payments to parents.

"I think it's about choice, I think parents really want choice ... There's a lot of diversity in what women want when they have children, and that was ignored by this announcement," Dancho told the Star in an interview.

Unlike the previous debate in 2005, however, the Liberals are proposing a national plan on top of the universal child care benefit — the Harper-era direct payments to parents, made more generous by the Liberals since they took power in 2015.

Dancho disagreed when asked if that fact undercuts the Conservative argument of favouring "choice" — that, essentially, the Liberal plan will still give parents just as much "choice," plus a national program.

"They're going to have to tax them more," Dancho said.

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Child-care spaces in Canada have been increasing over the last two decades. According to the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, the full- or part-day child-care spaces for kids up to five years old grew by 8.2 per cent between 2016 and 2019. The percentage of children with working moms also hit the highest point since 1998.

Despite those gains, there were regulated child-care centre spaces for just 26.9 per cent of children up to age five across Canada. And availability of spaces varied significantly depending on where you live — from 41.9 per cent in Quebec to 16.6 per cent in Saskatchewan. Ontario ranked near the bottom of the pack, with 20.6 per cent.

Martha Friendly, the executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, noted there can also be significant inequality of spaces within the same city. And that's before considering parents' ability to pay.

Most large cities in Canada charge more than \$700 a month for both infant and toddler spaces. But in the GTHA fees are significantly higher — with infant fees ranging from \$1,148 a month in Hamilton to \$1,774 in Toronto, according to 2019 data compiled by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Friendly noted that a child-care benefit — what the Conservatives and Liberals have offered since 2006 — is not a substitute for a child-care system.

"A child benefit is money to boost income or eradicate poverty. All countries who have good family policy have a child-care benefit but they also have a child-care system, and they also have parental leave. There's a lot of confusion in these things," Friendly said.

According to 2020 data from StatsCanada, 36 per cent of parents with kids up to age five experienced difficulty finding child care. Of that number, 53 per cent reported having trouble finding care in their own community, while 48 per cent said the challenge was affordability. Advocates argue you can't "choose" what isn't available or what you can't afford.

The numbers reveal the Conservatives' challenge. The percentage of people having trouble finding child care is a small part of the voting public. But those places where people struggle with child care are where the Conservatives need to make inroads to win the next election — the suburbs around Toronto and Vancouver.

Still, some argue that what worked for Harper could work for O'Toole.

"Based on what I've seen is we do need to reduce the cost of child care. It's good public policy, it's going to get women back in the workforce. I'm not convinced it's good politics though," said David Coletto, the CEO of Abacus Data.

"Running against it might not necessarily be a bad thing for the Conservatives, because they can make a claim that their alternative, more money for people to make up their mind on what they do, is more cost-effective, particularly for people who child care is not in their world, they either are older and don't have grandkids and aren't really thinking about child care, or don't plan to have kids any time soon."

But the Conservatives have a delicate line to walk between bashing the Liberals' plans while putting something in the window for young parents struggling to afford quality child care, said Kate Harrison, a conservative commentator and vice chair of Summa Strategies.

"The Tories could be competitive on this by acknowledging the importance of child care with their own plan that allows flexibility for parents to choose options that work for them," Harrison said in an interview.

"A blanket approach that will take years to stand up doesn't help parents today. If the Tories can offer something more immediate in

nature, that could be compelling for parents ... (like) expanding (child-care benefits) eligibility to new parents a couple months before their child was due. The idea here is that they would be able to offset some of the early expenses that come with parenthood.”

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

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

election <sup>[5]</sup>

national child care system <sup>[6]</sup>

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