

How 'choice' in child care might play out in the coming federal election ^[1]

The political messages that worked 16 years ago may not make sense now

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EXCERPTS

In one respect, the summer of 2021 is a lot like the fall of 2005: with the possibility of an election looming, a minority Liberal government is pursuing agreements with provinces to expand access to child care — an initiative the opposition Conservatives apparently disagree with.

The Conservatives effectively won that debate when they won power in January 2006.

But there are some important differences between then and now — and the talking points that worked in 2005 may no longer suffice.

By the end of November 2005, Paul Martin's Liberal government had signed bilateral agreements with each of the provinces to improve child care accessibility and services. The total federal commitment amounted to \$5 billion over five years.

But those agreements were soon made moot. Less than two months after the last deal was signed, the Liberals were reduced to 103 seats and out of power.

Fifteen years later, Justin Trudeau's government is committed to providing provinces with as much as \$30 billion over the next five years — and \$8.3 billion per year thereafter — to support an increase in "quality" and "affordable" child care. Last week, British Columbia became the first province to sign on. It will receive \$3.2 billion over five years, with commitments to create 30,000 new spaces and reduce child care fees.

The deal is a bit more than a simple transfer of funds. It creates a joint implementation committee and includes provisions on data collection and communities in need. The agreement includes a proposal by the federal government to table new legislation on child care this fall.

A 'freaking big deal'

"This commitment to data collection, monitoring and making it public is a really freaking big deal because you cannot build a system unless you know what you've got, what you're building on and how things are changing," said Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and member of the federal task force on women in the economy.

More planning is still needed if the goal is to create a national child care system, but the pieces may be in place to make that happen, Yalnizyan said.

If a federal election is weeks away, Trudeau's Liberals likely won't have all ten provinces signed on before the government faces voters. But a few more provinces could come to terms over the next month. And if the Liberals remain in power after a fall election, there will be pressure on the other provinces to take the money Ottawa is offering.

Of course, the prime minister could choose to continue trying his luck with Parliament and perhaps give himself another two years to advance child care before he has to face an election. The NDP is calling on him to do just that — a message Liberals might find ironic, given how New Democrats helped to bring down the Martin government in 2005.

'Freedom' funding

The Conservative response in 2005 was to offer parents more money. Instead of pursuing the Liberal government's agreements, Stephen Harper's Conservatives promised to provide monthly payments to parents of as much as \$100 per child.

Though the program would come to be called the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), it was originally advertised as the "Choice in Child Care Allowance" and its primary selling point was the idea of giving parents the freedom to choose the child care options best for them.

The Conservative response in 2021 is ... still a bit of a mystery. Since the Trudeau government came forward with its proposal in April, O'Toole's Conservatives have not explained what they would do with it if they form a government in the near future.

But the talking points sound familiar.

"Canadians should have the freedom to choose the child care option that is right for them and their families," Corey Tochor, the Conservative critic for families, children and social development, said in a media statement last week. "The Liberals are ignoring the individual needs of families who require flexibility in choices and forcing them into a one-size-fits-all system."

The federal government's agreement with B.C. does stipulate that "federal funding will be exclusively used to support licensed child care delivery by licensed providers." But that doesn't quite amount to anyone being "forced" into anything.

The bigger question is what the idea of "choice" means in 2021.

If O'Toole's Conservatives are looking to do something like the UCCB, they could pick up on proposals to enhance the Child Care Expense Deduction, which currently allows eligible parents to deduct up to \$8,000 per child.

But such a change would only account for a small percentage of the funding that the Liberals are offering. What, if anything, would the Conservatives do with the rest of that planned spending?

It's not just about the money

It could also be much harder now to argue that the only thing families need is more money, not least because the Liberals have already done the Conservatives one better in that respect.

Though Martin's Liberals crudely dismissed the Conservative party's child allowance in 2005, Trudeau's Liberals came to power in 2015 with a promise to give families even more money through the Canada Child Benefit. The Trudeau government amalgamated the UCCB and other family benefits, then added a few billion dollars in new funding to create the CCB, which distributed \$23 billion in its first year.

Politically and practically, there's a lot to be said for government policies that simply give people money, particularly if the money is aimed at those who need it most.

But when it comes to child care, so-called "demand-side" policies don't necessarily do much to increase the actual supply. And this is where the idea of "choice" really runs into trouble.

"What families in Canada have now is an uneven child care patchwork that varies in quality, accessibility and affordability," said Kate Bezanson, a sociology professor at Brock University who has advocated for a national child care system.

"'Choice' implies a decision between equally good options. Trading off between enormous expense, low quality, meagre access and labour market exit — usually for mothers — are not choices, but defaults. Tax credits or direct transfers to families don't build a single space, and don't address quality."

The other difference between 2005 and 2021 is the pandemic — a seismic event that both demonstrated the importance of child care and re-energized the argument that accessible child care is not only a nice thing to have but a vital program for advancing gender equality and promoting economic growth.

There might still be a debate about the Trudeau government's plan. But if there is to be a debate about child care in 2021, it needs to move beyond the simple dichotomies of the past.

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