

Opinion: Federal Liberals bank on urban votes with affordable child-care plan ^[1]

Author: Ibbitson, John

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EXCERPTS

Under the Liberal government's new child-care program, nine of the 10 communities in which eligible parents would save the most money are in or near Greater Toronto or Greater Vancouver, the two urban hubs where federal elections are won and lost - which may be why Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole is so very quiet on the subject.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives, a progressive think tank, released a study Thursday that shows parents in Mississauga could save \$9,635 in child-care fees next year if the Ontario government joined the program. The savings in Richmond, B.C., would be \$7,800. British Columbia and Nova Scotia have already signed agreements.

There are potentially enormous financial benefits for parents with children in cities with high child-care costs - cities that just happen to contain swing ridings with an election imminent. Politically, it's genius.

The Liberals are gambling that attitudes toward child care have changed. In 2005, Paul Martin's Liberal government, having pledged \$5-billion over five years, negotiated accords with all 10 provinces for child-care spaces.

But Conservative leader Stephen Harper opposed the program, promising cash payments to parents instead. The Conservatives won the 2006 election; their cheques replaced the Liberals' subsidies.

Under the new and more ambitious Liberal plan, child-care costs would gradually fall to \$10 a day, with most spaces in the non-profit sector, and with well-trained and well-paid caregivers.

Why is the public ready for such a plan now, when it seemed unwilling 15 years ago?

For one thing, provinces have been experimenting with child-care support programs. (Quebec's program has been in place since 1996.) As well, "the pandemic highlighted that child care and schools are incredibly important to allow people to work," said David Macdonald, senior economist with the Centre for Policy Alternatives and author of the report. Women are particularly vulnerable. At the beginning of the recession, they accounted for 63 per cent of all lost jobs.

As well, Mr. Macdonald believes, "there is a lot less reticence and concern about federal deficits." Ottawa went more than \$350-billion into the red last fiscal year to fight the pandemic. Compared to that, what's \$30-billion over five years to lower child-care fees?

That expense is just one reason why Conservatives might be expected to oppose the plan as they did in 2005. They could again be expected to argue parents should have the flexibility to make the arrangements they prefer.

Publicly funded child care extends the reach of the state: Child-care workers delivering government-funded care are more likely to be in the non-profit sector, to be unionized, to command higher wages, and to vote Liberal or NDP.

In June, Mr. O'Toole said his party was committed to a flexible, federally funded child-care program, calling it "critical infrastructure."

But he has kept a very low profile on the issue, perhaps because he knows the Liberal program will be popular in ridings his party needs to win.

Child care is an area of provincial responsibility. Premiers should be wary of buying into a program that a future federal government could retreat from, warns Janice MacKinnon, a professor of fiscal policy at University of Saskatchewan. In the 1990s, Prof. MacKinnon held various cabinet posts, including finance minister, in the governments of former NDP premier Roy Romanow.

She pointed out that low-cost child care leads to wait lists, and the better-off always find a way to get to the front of those lists.

"You really are creating two tiers of parents," she said. One tier is middleclass parents who will be able to access \$10-a-day daycare because they live in the big cities where it's available. "And then you have another class of people who are shift workers, or they live in smaller communities, and they're scrambling to find daycare and they're paying more." This program offers less for them.

Nonetheless, "I think it's important for there to be a child-care program," Prof. MacKinnon added. "All parties, including the Conservatives, will have to come up with something." She prefers child-care credits for parents, grants for licensed providers, and incentives for employer-provided care.

The Liberals' child-care program is expensive and intrusive and inflexible. But they believe the public wants it, and they are probably right - which is why Mr. O'Toole is keeping mum.

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