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EXCERPTS

Depending on the day and who's making the speech, this federal election is entirely unnecessary or crucial to determining Canada's future.

But on at least one issue, vital to the nation's pandemic recovery and economic prosperity, it's nothing more than a depressing rehash of an old battle.

Once again, a Liberal government has introduced a national plan for affordable child care late in its term. And, once again, a Conservative leader has promised that, if elected, he'll kill it.

This is a reprise of Canada's 2006 election and Ontario's 2018 provincial election. Both times families and the economy lost big time.

This time, it's Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole promising to scrap the Liberals' $10-a-day child-care plan in favour of refundable tax credits for families. Never mind that most of the provinces have already signed on.

Nation-building programs are hard and many fall short or go unfulfilled, so promises of quick cash instead always hold some appeal come election time. O'Toole is banking on that happening again.

But his tax credit won't do what he says it will for individual families, and it won't create the universal, affordable child-care system the economy needs.

O'Toole says his plan provides "flexibility" so parents can choose whatever child care they want and offers "extra support to those who need it most."

But it isn't enough money to pay for the licensed child care that exists, if that's what parents want. And a great many do.

Not even for the sweet-spot families, should they even exist, who spend more than a quarter of their $30,000 family income on child care and would be eligible for the maximum $6,000 benefit.

In Ontario, which has the greatest need for affordable child care, the median cost of licensed care in 2020 ranged from $12,000 a year for a preschooler to $17,000 for an infant.

So, under O'Toole's plan, they're still $6,000 to $11,000 short. Families with higher incomes, who still struggle mightily to pay child-care costs, would fare even worse.

A tax credit helps with affordability, certainly — if a family can find a child-care space in their area and if they can afford to pay the rest of the cost.

It will not help create the hundreds of thousands of new spaces that are needed across the country to expand access to everyone who wants it. It will not bring down the high costs. And it will not boost wages for child-care workers, key to attracting the workforce to expand and stabilize the system.

We know all this because Stephen Harper's Conservatives went down the same road in 2006 when they replaced a plan by Paul Martin's Liberal government to kick-start universal child-care with cheques for parents.

And we watched it happen again in 2018 when Doug Ford's PCs replaced Kathleen Wynne's Liberal plan to provide free licensed care for preschool children with tax credits.

Ontario's child-care crisis remains unabated. Parents in this province still longingly look to Quebec, which has affordable child care because its provincial government has long recognized the value of investing in it.

To expand access, reduce parent fees and improve wages requires federal-provincial effort and significant funding.

That's what's laid out in the Liberal plan to cut average child care costs in half next year and get to $10-a-day care by 2026.

Some provinces, including Conservative governments in Manitoba and P.E.I., have already said the federal funding will enable them to

reach the $10 target years sooner.

Jagmeet Singh's NDP platform also promises $10-a-day child care, no wait lists for parents and fair living wages for workers.

Even in its first year, the Liberal plan provides a greater benefit to more parents than O'Toole's cashback plan ever will. And why wouldn't it?

The Liberals are proposing to spend $30 billion over five years to get universal child care off the ground and $9.2 billion a year after that.

The Conservatives have not said what their program will cost. But University of Toronto economist Gordon Cleveland points out that it's on par with a proposal analyzed by the C.D. Howe Institute with a net cost of $1.2 billion per year.

Less is less — no matter how many times a conservative tries to claim otherwise.

What has changed is that O'Toole seems to understand what's at stake. "Allowing women to reach true equality in the work force is impossible without child care," his platform states.

In the 2019 election, the Conservative platform didn't even mention child care. And Harper's child care allowance wasn't aimed at getting women into the workforce. In fact, it was more beneficial to a mom staying home.

But to see the problem and propose a solution that clearly won't fix it, is just as much of a let-down to women.

Lack of child care keeps women out of the workforce and that holds women and the economy back.

Both the Liberals and NDP have plans that will make a difference. The Conservatives do not.

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