

Child care in this election definitely isn't child's play ^[1]

'While provinces face serious fiscal problems created by the pandemic, the lure of extra federal dollars tied to specific goals makes it harder for provinces to say no.'

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EXCERPTS

A key announcement in the 2021 federal budget was the \$30-billion Early Learning and Child Care plan, which seemed to promise that child care would be an important pillar of the Liberals' social-policy platform in the next election. The plan would be a welcome reprieve for Canadian parents, who pay some of the highest child-care fees in the world.

Child care pulls double duty: It's an important part of the Liberals' economic policy, as it provides jobs for workers (particularly women), and allows parents to reach their economic potential. It's also an economic amplifier, since each dollar invested generates an estimated \$1.50 to \$2.80 in the economy.

The Liberals are presenting affordable child care to voters as a way of helping Canada's economy recover from COVID: It will return more women to the workforce, while contributing to gender equality — another one of Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau's signature issues.

Getting provinces onside

Given the short runway from April's federal budget, the real question was whether the Trudeau government could get the provinces and territories on board its transformative plan before the next election.

In the weeks before the campaign began, the answer was a definitive "yes." The first agreement was signed with British Columbia on July 8. Next came Nova Scotia, on the eve of the election call in that province. Through July, Prince Edward Island, the Yukon, and Newfoundland and Labrador all signed on.

Most important for electoral reasons, Ottawa and Quebec reached an asymmetric agreement on Aug. 5, in which the province gets a federal transfer worth nearly \$6 billion over five years.

Despite some skeptics saying agreements couldn't be reached with Conservative-led governments, deals with both Manitoba and Saskatchewan were announced before the election campaign.

It's clear that, when cash is on the table, the provinces will talk and work with the federal government. While provinces face serious fiscal problems created by the pandemic, the lure of extra federal dollars tied to specific goals makes it harder for provinces to say no.

But what about the other provinces holding out on child care? Alberta's ruling United Conservative Party had been in advanced discussions with Ottawa, but accused the Trudeau government of putting up last-minute roadblocks to intentionally scuttle a deal before the election. Conservative governments in Ontario and New Brunswick were also likely leery of giving the Trudeau Liberals an easy political win, just weeks before the federal election.

Child care in the campaign

Voters can expect to hear a lot during the campaign about the Liberal promise of \$10-a-day child care and the deals made so far with the provinces.

The NDP platform re-commits the party to: providing universal \$10/day daycare; enshrining publicly funded daycare in law; and "(saving) not-for-profit child-care centres that are at risk" because of the pandemic.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, present an alternative to the \$10-a-day model. Their plan is designed to be more flexible by converting the child-care-expense deduction into a refundable tax credit, and to cover up to 75 per cent of lower-income families' daycare costs. The plan would benefit low- and middle-income families the most, the Conservative platform says.

Liberals will be accused of not having acted quickly enough to help families. But with eight of Canada's 13 provinces and territories signed on to their plan in a matter of months, that argument might not stick.

The choice for voters might come down to which party's model they prefer, and if they can imagine that party forming government after

Sept. 20. Daycare costs form a large part of a family's budget, and, in an early-election poll, Abacus Data found that daycare affordability and the cost of living are at the top of voters' minds.

It's early days yet, but, as we approach election day, expect debate of this important matter to get more pointed and political.

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