

Fate of Nova Scotia's \$10-a-day child-care deal hinges on federal election ^[1]

\$605M agreement could be in jeopardy depending on outcome of federal election

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EXCERPTS

The fate of the \$10-a-day child-care agreement for Nova Scotia that's been much-lauded by those working in the sector is in the hands of voters across the country.

On July 13, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Iain Rankin, the premier at the time, announced a \$605-million agreement that would see child-care costs in Nova Scotia halved by the end of 2022 and become on average \$10 a day by 2026.

The program would also create 9,500 early learning and child-care spaces in the province by 2025.

During the announcement, Trudeau was asked whether the agreement would be dependent on the Liberals being re-elected. He told reporters the federal-provincial funding agreement was already signed, and that "there is nothing that is contingent on anything happening or not happening in the coming months or year."

But the agreement is not as secure as Trudeau's assurances make it appear, since a federal election is underway.

Jim Bickerton, a professor in the political science department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S., said government agreements are not set in stone for time immemorial.

"In no way, I think, could you say that these are ironclad agreements and that it doesn't matter who wins the election."

Bickerton said a new government would not be legally obliged to follow through on the Liberal commitment — as evidenced, for example, by the Stephen Harper Conservative government's cancellation in 2006 of child-care agreements with 10 provinces negotiated for the Liberals under Paul Martin.

Conservative, NDP plans

The federal Conservative Party has said a Conservative government would scrap the Liberal child-care agreements — which have been signed by eight provinces and territories — in favour of tax credits.

The party's platform calls for the existing child-care expense tax deduction to be converted into a refundable tax credit that would be paid out during the year and cover up to 75 per cent of child-care costs for low-income families.

The party estimates that a family with an income of \$30,000 would get up to \$6,000, a family with an income of \$50,000 would get \$5,200 and a family with \$80,000 in income would get \$4,800.

The NDP has said it would also build a \$10-a-day child-care system across Canada, create more child-care spaces and improve the pay of workers in the sector.

Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston said Thursday he hopes any new federal government honours the agreement "unless they're proposing a better deal."

Houston said his government will be pushing the federal government "to make sure Nova Scotians are supported and that child care specifically is focused on."

What happens if there's a minority?

Bickerton said if the Liberals win a minority government, the agreements would probably survive because the balance of power would likely rest with parties that are generally in favour of the Liberals' child-care plan.

The Bloc Quebecois, he said, could be expected to support the plan because, although Quebec already has daycare that costs parents on average \$8.50 per day, the province would benefit financially from its federal-provincial agreement, which would see a \$6-billion influx of cash from Ottawa.

If the Conservatives get a minority, withdrawing from the child-care agreements could be dangerous, Bickerton said.

"It could spur a defeat of the government in Parliament based on a vote of non-confidence that might be called on this issue — if the opposition deemed it important enough and if they saw a political advantage in doing it."

On the other hand, Bickerton said, there would be plenty of people in a Conservative caucus and in the voter base who would push the government to keep its promise to scrap the agreements.

A minority NDP government would also be likely to push through a \$10-a-day child-care proposal with the support of the Liberals.

Child-care advocacy group 'very nervous'

Morna Ballantyne, the executive director of Child Care Now, a national child-care advocacy group, said she's "very nervous" about the election because cancelling the agreements would be a "huge step backward."

"It's really unfortunate that at the federal level, not all the federal parties have understood the importance of building a system of early learning and child care," she said, adding that there's a consensus in the business and labour communities, women's organizations and provincial governments that this kind of investment in child care is needed.

"It's really unfortunate that the Conservative Party of Canada is really offside on this issue. They really are outside of the consensus."

Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole said during the release of the party's full platform last month that his plan would "massively increase" support for low income families and that it would happen "immediately, not some years from now."

The platform says payments would be made to families over the course of the year, so they wouldn't have to cover the costs of child care and then be forced to wait for the money.

Miia Suokonautio, the executive director of the YWCA Halifax, said the Conservative Party plan to simply introduce a tax credit would not address the lack of child-care spaces or working conditions and staff shortages in the sector.

She said although she wants to see the agreement implemented, and will fight for it to be implemented, she will work with whatever government is elected to work toward change.

"I can only control what I can control, right? So all I can do is vote and encourage other people to vote."

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