

Tory Premiers should prod Poilievre to keep child-care deals, minister says ^[1]

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Excerpts

Provincial conservative premiers touting \$10-a-day child-care deals with Ottawa is a welcome move, even if some of the leaders now campaigning on the deals were among the last to sign them, federal Liberal Families Minister Karina Gould said.

Now she says they need to push federal Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre to explain if he would keep the agreements in place.

“They should probably be prodding their federal counterpart at the Conservative Party of Canada as to what their position is.”

Between July 2021 and March 2022, the federal government signed deals with every province and territory that would see child-care fees cut in half within the year and to an average of \$10 a day within five years. The 2021 budget earmarked \$30 billion over five years for the plan.

Poilievre has not committed to honour the agreements. During the last election, the Conservatives under then-leader Erin O’Toole campaigned on a promise to respect the deals – not all of which were yet signed – only for one year. After that, the Conservatives said the program would be phased out in favour of a tax credit targeting low-income families.

Several premiers have used or are using the deals in their re-election bids, including United Conservative Party Leader Danielle Smith in Alberta, a province expected to enter a campaign any day now.

In December 2021, before becoming premier, Smith wrote an op-ed in the Calgary Herald calling the child-care deal just signed with Ottawa by her predecessor, Jason Kenney, a failure of conservatism. She said then that the money would be better left in the hands of parents to decide directly how to spend it.

“In practice, it’s given total control to Ottawa over how we deliver child care,” she wrote.

Smith is now facing a tight race against former premier Rachel Notley’s NDP in the upcoming provincial vote, especially in the seats around Calgary.

The premier recently released a campaign video committing that a re-elected UCP government would ensure “all Albertans have access to \$10-a-day daycare by 2026.”

She added they are proud of the deal sealed with Ottawa, which includes funding for both private and non-profit child-care spaces.

The inclusion of both was a sticking point for Alberta when the Liberal government first unveiled a plan.

In an interview with The Canadian Press, Gould said that without Ottawa’s leadership, “there would be no child-care initiative across Canada in any of these provinces.”

“Let’s be clear. In Alberta, all \$3.8 billion that are there for families is from the federal government. We haven’t seen the province of Alberta put money on the table yet for child care.”

Party spokesman Dave Prisco said the UCP government “advocated and insisted” on a model that supports parental choice. He added it will spend more than \$1 billion on early learning and child care – including more than \$850 million through the agreement with Ottawa.

Gould insisted that Canadians know “this is a federal initiative” that provinces needed to sign on to – but not all provincial and territorial leaders have been making that explicitly clear.

The Manitoba government released a social media ad earlier this month touting \$10-a-day child care that didn’t mention Ottawa – though a spokesperson for the government said it does make that reference “in some of its advertising,” including in radio ads and on a website linked from the ads.

A document obtained under freedom-of-information law shows Manitoba’s government has spent slightly more on promoting affordable

child care than it has on cheques being mailed to the province's households, intended to help residents battle inflation. A separate document shows \$500,000 has been earmarked for the child-care campaign.

While the province contends such advertising is necessary to inform residents about accessible supports, critics charge that public money is being spent to increase Premier Heather Stefanson's chances of winning the provincial election against the NDP this fall.

Stefanson recently appeared alongside Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to promote how the agreement would result in costs being lowered to an average of \$10 a day by this month, ahead of its 2026 goal.

Hitting that target by the end of this year was a campaign pledge Prince Edward Island Premier Dennis King also rolled out when his Progressive Conservatives sought re-election this spring, saying they were among the first to sign a deal.

He coupled that pledge with promises to build more child-care centres and recruit more workers.

Goeld said such moves show that provincial conservatives understand the economic and social benefits of the national child-care program.

The federal Conservatives, meanwhile, are walking a fine line on the matter. Its MPs voted in favour of sending a Liberal child-care bill to be studied in a House of Commons committee. The bill would enshrine long-term funding for the national child-care program into law.

Poilievre has said he wants to see the program's results, and believes in offering supports to parents, "regardless of what choices they make."

Ontario MP Michelle Ferreri, the Tories' critic in Parliament on the matter, declined an interview request.

But during a committee hearing, she charged that the existing plan is not universal, saying that some child-care arrangements – such as home daycares or families that rely on nannies or extended family to take care of their children – are left out.

The Conservatives have also raised concerns about a shortage of daycare spaces across the country, echoed by those in the sector.

Ferreri also told one committee hearing that while Liberals are attempting to "paint the Conservatives as anti-child care ... nothing could be further from the truth."

Kate Harrison, a vice-chair at Summa Strategies and party activist, said Tories are in a position to offer solutions when it comes to issues around eligibility – and they can offer up new ideas with their own version of a child-care plan.

Longtime campaign strategist Melanie Paradis agreed, saying that coming up with a plan to offer affordable child care will be crucial.

She said it's one of the most important policies the party will have to present to Canadians as they face a cost-of-living crisis that includes high daycare costs.

But can Poilievre afford to scrap the current deals like O'Toole did in 2021? Both Paradis and Harrison agreed that horse has left the barn.

Shachi Kurl, executive director of the Angus Reid Institute, which publishes public opinion research, pointed to the conservative premiers' statements as an example of leaders embracing a program they realize is popular with working families rather than prioritizing ideological preferences about parental choice and the size of government.

Poilievre will have to decide which way to go, she suggested.

"Will he want to be the ideologue? Or will he want to shift to where the votes are?" she said.

"That will be the pickle for him."

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