

New generation, old daycare woes [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Times have changed, Lisa MacLeod told herself confidently, as she became the youngest MPP at Queen's Park.

She wouldn't have to turn her office into a makeshift nursery, the way Liberal MP Sheila Copps had done 20 years ago. She wouldn't have to exhaust herself proving that motherhood could be combined with politics, the way New Democrat Shelley Martel had done for more than a decade.

"I was naïve," the 32-year-old Conservative rookie admitted. "I am facing the same obstacles they faced."

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But when MacLeod arrived at Queen's Park, she found no support for female politicians with children, not even a list of daycare centres to call.

She had eight days to move into an apartment, set up offices at the Legislature and in the riding, meet her colleagues, prepare her maiden speech and make arrangements for her daughter.

She started bringing Victoria to work, hunting frantically for child care between meetings, appointments and debates. But the harder she looked, the more discouraged she got. Her aides helped as much as they could, but a cramped office at Queen's Park was no place for a growing baby.

Ultimately, MacLeod gave up her desperate search. Her husband, Joe Varner, sacrificed his career, moved to Toronto and became the primary caregiver. He now works at home, teaching online courses for American Military University.

"We've managed quite well," MacLeod said. But her husband is paying a steep price and she realizes that most young couples couldn't afford to do what she and Varner have done.

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Despite her own difficulties, MacLeod is not advocating affordable public child care for all working parents in Ontario.

Part of the reason is that she doesn't want to undercut her leader, John Tory, who has yet to announce a policy on the issue. (His predecessors, Mike Harris and Ernie Eves, refused to invest a cent in institutional child care.) Tory is expected to unveil his platform at the party's pre-election convention this weekend.

She is also loath to criticize Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who introduced a \$100-a-month child-care allowance for parents of preschoolers last year. MacLeod calls it "a great way to help."

For now, she is concentrating on modernizing the provincial Legislature to accommodate the needs of members with young families.

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