

Minister stands firm on child care plan [CA] ^[1]

Author: Bailey, Sue

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EXCERPTS

Human Resources Minister Diane Finley shows no sign of flinching under mounting criticism that the Tory child-care plan will help richer, single-earner families more than low-income parents.

Conservatives were elected on a key promise to provide support that's "universally available to people whatever their choice and needs are," she said in an interview.

Finley was on the defensive in the Commons again Wednesday over what critics are calling a backward approach that favours some families over others.

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Finley said she has been working "to make sure that as many families as possible get as much money — net — as possible from this new program because we want it to be a universal benefit."

She offered no other hint, however, on how this will be achieved as the Tories introduce their first budget next Tuesday.

At issue is a central plan to give parents \$1,200 for each child under age six.

A growing chorus of critics has urged the Tories to ensure that taxes and provincial clawbacks don't eat away much of that benefit.

The independent, non-partisan Caledon Institute of Social Policy joined in Wednesday.

"As proposed to date, the new \$1,200 child-care allowance will be a flawed scheme creating deep inequities," it says in a report that calculates the impact of existing clawbacks and taxes.

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Finley dismissed the report, saying the numbers "were inaccurate."

But Caledon president Ken Battle says the Conservative approach, unless adjusted in the actual budget, amounts to a social step backward.

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"That's probably what they want to do because there's an ideological thing about having parents in the home," he said.

Socially conservative, family-values groups have been urged by some Tories to more vocally support the Conservative plan and counter critics who are pushing for expanded, regulated child-care services across Canada.

They argue that the best way to raise children is for one parent to stay home.

Battle was consulted by the former Liberal government as it designed a cross-country effort to improve and create more early learning spaces.

He is now urging the Conservatives to funnel the \$1,200 payments through the existing Canada Child Tax Benefit.

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Finley has been busy defending the Tory child-care plan, but insists it's popular with voters.

Opposition MPs like to remind her that two-thirds of Canadians voted on Jan. 23 for parties that support much more expansive services.

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- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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