

Child care Harper's first serious challenge [CA] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

When it comes to practical results, political appeal and even Conservative fiscal orthodoxy, Stephen Harper's child-care plan makes no sense.

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So why is the prime minister, and his designated front-woman, Diane Finley, the minister of human resources and social development, so unwilling to compromise?

In the absence of other compelling arguments, the answer has to be ideological. (The government's language certainly is.) Harper doesn't like federal meddling in social policy, which he considers a provincial domain. And he doesn't believe "the state" should "replace" parents when it comes to child-rearing.

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This is a divisive and dishonest characterization of a complex issue, and many working parents, who make up the significant majority, know it. The same goes for Finley's insulting suggestion that the Tory program will help parents "who want to raise their own children" -- as if the moms and dads who work full time are somehow derelict, or not really parenting.

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On the other hand, fiscal conservatives can't be happy with the main element of the Conservative plan: a \$1,200 annual payment for every child younger than six years.

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What is far worse is Harper's vow to end agreements signed with the provinces by the Liberals that laid the groundwork for our first national child-care system -- and there may be nothing the opposition can do to stop that.

Funding will dry up next spring, forcing provinces to abandon plans to add much-needed spaces or improve conditions for underpaid early-childhood workers.

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Finley's answer to critics, who point out that parents (contrary to Tory mythology) are desperate for quality care, is a \$250-million plan to produce 125,000 new spaces over five years. Companies would get a \$10,000 tax credit for every space they create. The plan is also open to community and non-profit groups, although it isn't clear how they will qualify for tax credits when they pay no tax.

Nor is she clear how small businesses could afford to participate. (Finley makes the fanciful suggestion that individual strip-mall merchants could get together and build a joint facility for their staffs.)

Meanwhile, the child-care "experts" that Harper disparages say one quality space costs \$20,000 in Toronto (and up to \$40,000 in Vancouver), a far cry from the \$10,000 budgeted.

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This is a bad idea that could provoke the first serious challenge to Harper's government. Bring your decoder. And pay attention to what parents, not politicians, are saying.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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