

Interview: Diane Finley, Minister of Human Resources and Social Development [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

CAROLE MACNEIL (Anchor): The House of Commons returns in a couple of weeks, your first chance to see Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative minority government at work. Harper has promised to push through five key policies from his election campaign and childcare is at the top of the list. Who's in charge of that file? Human Resources Minister Diane Finley.

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I spoke with Diane Finley at her office on Parliament Hill. Why do you think that the unions, Childcare Federation, others, certain women's groups really want the Liberal, former Liberal plan and don't find this one to be adequate?

DIANE FINLEY (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development): Frankly, a lot of people have a problem understanding that there are childcare needs outside of nine to five, Monday to Friday. You know, in a lot of urban areas people basically work nine to five. That's sort of expected and that's why you have the great traffic jams going in and out. A lot of the country doesn't work that way and they need childcare too. So I think there are people out there who don't understand the needs of the rest of the country, people who are different from them.

MACNEIL: Is that a shot at Toronto?

FINLEY: It's not a shot at anyone. It's just, we all bring our own personal perspective to things and it's important to recognize that there are people who are different, who have other needs. That's what we're trying to recognize here. So you know, people are going to come out and complain about it. You talk about unions. Well, yeah, because the original plan would have created a lot of institutionalized jobs. We're here, not for those jobs, but we're here for the parents. We're here for the kids to make sure they get the childcare that they need, but also that the parents have the choice.

MACNEIL: Let's talk about the 1,200 dollar plan because what the critics say is, 1,200 dollars a year, when daycare costs between 6,000 and 12,000 a year is really, doesn't offer a person a lot of choice.

FINLEY: Well, that's just the opposite. It really does offer choice. It's not meant to provide totally subsidized daycare. That's not the intention. It's to help parents, especially in those early years, where they have young children and a lot of expenses and low income, to help them get the childcare they need. Now that childcare doesn't have to be institutionalized. It might be staying at home. It might be grandma. It might be the next-door neighbour. But we believe that parents are the best ones to choose who raises their children and that's why we're offering this program to absolutely everyone.

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MACNEIL: Is there room for some sort of compromise on the federal government's part to get this legislation into effect?

FINLEY: Well, with the 1,200 dollars I don't think we're going to need to compromise.

MACNEIL: It's not even taking the tax off it because it's taxable.

FINLEY: It is taxable in the hands of the lower income spouse. So if it's a stay-at-home mom or a stay-at-home dad who's not paying tax, then it's tax-free. When there's a stay-at-home mom or dad, he or she needs to go to the doctor for their own personal medical reasons, they can't always tote along three toddlers. That's tough. Our plan will help them.

MACNEIL: Will it also recognize the needs of a mother who wants to get back into the workforce, you know, usually moms, not always, but usually moms who want to get back into the workforce but suddenly looks around now at the current situation and says, I can't afford daycare. The waiting lists in this country are really long.

FINLEY: We've recognized that shortage. We've seen it. We've heard it promised for the last twelve, thirteen years. We've heard promises and promises about a national plan and there's never been one. Not one. So that's why we're saying now we've got to create these new

spaces because we see the line-ups. But we also have to recognize and not punish parents who want something other than nine to five, having the government raise their kids. We don't, you know, we want the freedom of choice and that's what it really comes down to all the way across. Freedom of choice. The other thing is, this is 1,200 dollars that no other party has ever promised. So everyone's actually ahead, plus we're going to create 125,000 new childcare spaces. And those won't just be in big cities. They will be right across the country because businesses, community groups will have incentives to create those childcare spaces where they're needed, when they're needed & and I'm talking here in terms of hours of operation & for the people who really need them.

MACNEIL: Through the tax credit system.

FINLEY: Through the tax credits and other incentives.

MACNEIL: How do you know that will work?

FINLEY: We believe it will work. The incentives are significant. We also believe that businesses, in particular, will recognize the value of having, of their employees having peace of mind because they know where their kids are, they're close at hand, they're being well taken care of. So that's going to increase productivity and it's going to reduce the anxiety of the parents. And we expect it will also decrease absenteeism. Smart employers will do this and there are a lot of smart employers out there.

MACNEIL: What if private entrepreneurs don't step up to the plate and don't create those childcare spaces?

FINLEY: Well, we believe they will. We're offering strong incentives. We believe...

MACNEIL: How strong?

FINLEY: Well, we're talking up to 10,000 dollars per space. That's pretty significant incentive.

MACNEIL: What about smaller companies?

FINLEY: For example, there are a number of strip malls right across this country, big towns and small. If those employers, the shop operators were to get together and create a daycare operation for their employees, it could be running nine in the morning until nine at night, seven days a week to help their employees. Everybody gets together and does it. In even smaller communities community groups can put it together and there are a lot of very good, very strong community groups, particularly in the rural areas. So there are a lot of options right across the country.

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