

Competing concerns [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has told the premiers he wants to fix Canada's fiscal imbalance, but not by preserving the Liberals' national day-care program.

Hosting the provincial and territorial leaders last night for a two-hour "informal" dinner at 24 Sussex Drive, Harper stressed his intent to replace the fledgling \$5-billion child-care system with \$1,200 baby bonus cheques sent directly to parents for each child under the age of six.

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Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, among other premiers, hopes a resolution to the child-care impasse will be found.

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Ontario's Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Marie Bountrogianni said earlier scrapping the Liberal agreements will mean the loss of 20,000 new child-care spaces for Ontario alone.

The Hamilton Mountain MPP said Ontario is committed to giving parents "one-stop shopping" at schools for everything from day care and breakfast programs to before and after-school care, but would have to do so at a slower pace without federal funds.

"It's an excellent model, research-based, and I would hate for Prime Minister Harper to kill it."

Bountrogianni said the cuts in day-care funding would cost Ontario \$1.87 billion over five years, money she hopes could be found elsewhere by the Conservatives in their talks with the provinces on the so-called fiscal imbalance.

"We're not saying to them, 'Change your child-care plans,'" she said. "We're just saying, 'Provide the necessary resources, so there is room for negotiations.'"

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Speaking after dinner, Manitoba Premier Gary Doer sounded pessimistic, suggesting opposition MPs in Parliament would have a better chance of forcing the minority Tory government of changing its mind on child care.

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His comments came the same day as Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said letters have been sent to the provinces warning Ottawa will only live up to the first year of the five-year accord.

"We will proceed with the childcare tax credit of \$1,200 a year for children under six year, so the choice will be with the parents (as to how they spend it)," Flaherty said earlier yesterday in Toronto.

Human Resources Minister Diane Finley echoed that sentiment.

"We can't do both plans. What we're saying is we promised to do this, we are doing it," Finley said.

Still, Quebec Premier Jean Charest tried to strike an optimistic note about the "cordial" dinner and held out hope that when Harper rectifies the fiscal imbalance, there will be some funds for a child-care system.

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Toronto Mayor David Miller warned the city is going to be seriously hurt by Harper's decision. "We were going to build 120 new childcare centres, predominantly in neighbourhood schools and most in the poorest neighbourhoods in Toronto ... over the next two years ... but without it (federal money) those centres will not open," Miller said in Toronto.

- reprinted from the Hamilton Spectator

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