

Tories have a fight on hands on child care, say Liberals [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

After self-destructing in the election campaign, the federal Liberals got a bit of a boost in their political spirits last week thanks to a controversy-filled first week in power for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government.

One veteran Liberal MP, who is considering a run at the Liberal leadership, said the Conservatives would have to consult the opposition parties before trying to go ahead with controversial plans for not only childcare, but infrastructure and communities.

"If they want to be respectful of the House, they think they have a mandate, the mandate is constrained by the fact they're in a minority position and, at their peril, will they jeopardize things which are not simply Liberal things. There are things in which there's a great deal of popular support for across the country," said Liberal MP John Godfrey, a five-term member who served as the minister of infrastructure and communities in the Paul Martin Cabinet.

But Mr. Godfrey refused to say whether the Liberals would consider defeating the government over these issues.

A few hours after he was sworn in last week, Prime Minister Harper said he would move ahead with his childcare agenda so that parents would start receiving the proposed childcare allowance for children under six by July 1.

According to the Conservative government plan, the federal government will give each family with a child under the age of six an allowance of \$1,200 per year or \$100 per month.

Mr. Harper's plan would also provide \$250 million in tax credits for employers and non-profit agencies to create new day-care spaces.

The three opposition parties opposed the Conservative childcare plan during the recent federal election campaign and also reiterated their opposition last week. Liberals who currently have 102 MPs in the House have proposed a national daycare program, which would create more formal daycare spaces.

The current agreement in place between Ottawa and the provinces on child care would die on March 31, 2007. Provincial premiers have demanded that the federal government treat all the provinces equally on this issue in any future deal. The Quebec government has urged Mr. Harper to respect its agreement with Ottawa since it has already put in place its own public childcare program.

But after Mr. Harper's office suggested it would offer a special transition deal for Quebec, other provinces, like Ontario started lining up, asking for the same treatment.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said on Friday that Mr. Harper told him in a 15-minute telephone call the day before that Ottawa will treat all the provinces equally when it comes to their plans for childcare programs, The Canadian Press reported.

The provinces, including Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba, have promised to fight Mr. Harper's plan to scrap the former Liberal government's \$5-billion daycare deal with the provinces.

And last Thursday, NDP MP Olivia Chow (Trinity-Spadina, Ont.) announced that her party would introduce a National Child Care Act once Parliament resumed.

The Bloc Québécois also urged the Conservatives to respect the agreement. But leader Gilles Duceppe took a slightly different view, saying the ultimate goal would be to resolve the fiscal imbalance.

"Stephen Harper must absolutely respect his commitment made last December 19 in Quebec City during the election campaign, and settle, once and for all, the entire question of the fiscal imbalance. In the meantime, the best sign of good faith, in this sense, is to maintain the agreement on funding for daycares," Mr. Duceppe said in Montreal last week.

Meanwhile, as for his leadership aspirations, Mr. Godfrey said that he would make a final decision after the party executive meets on March 18 to set the rules governing the leadership process. He added that he would focus his campaign on issues such as environment, aboriginal affairs, childcare, cities and infrastructure and most importantly to involve young people into the Liberal Party.

- reprinted from the Hill Times

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