

Harper's best option to boost child care [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Feb 2006

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

After taking some flak for his cabinet choices, Prime Minister Stephen Harper understandably wants to change the subject.

So he is pushing forward with his popular pledge to give parents \$1,200 a year for child care, even at the risk of inviting an early confrontation with the opposition parties.

But the opposition in Parliament may not be Harper's biggest problem on daycare.

Premier Dalton McGuinty and the other provincial leaders stand to lose billions.

At issue is the \$1.2 billion in annual federal funding that former prime minister Paul Martin pledged to the provinces in daycare agreements that Ottawa negotiated with each of them.

Harper plans to cancel the agreements, after giving the required one-year notice, and to divert the money into the new allowance he promised parents, a \$100-a-month cheque for every Canadian child under 6.

Although Harper calls it a child-care allowance, it is closer in spirit to the old "family allowance." It will go to stay-at-home parents as well as working parents. All will be free to spend it in any way they see fit.

While this may be popular, it won't help the premiers create the large number of high-quality child-care spaces needed by young parents who have little choice but to work. Even parents who can afford costly daycare have trouble finding it.

Because daycare falls under provincial jurisdiction, like health care, welfare and education, the premiers already are lobbying Harper not to take away the daycare money that the Liberals caused to start flowing last year.

Harper has not been deaf to the problem. Last week he told Quebec Premier Jean Charest that Ottawa is prepared to negotiate a transition period for daycare funding in Quebec.

That suggestion prompted McGuinty, rightly, to seek the same deal for Ontario. And Harper gave McGuinty his word that every province will be treated in the same way.

Does Harper have the money to make good on the \$1.2 billion Liberal pledge and his own pledge of \$1.9 billion a year? Yes. The federal government is running an \$8 billion surplus. If daycare is shaping up as Harper's first priority, the money is there.

Moreover, Harper has promised to fix the so-called fiscal imbalance that leaves Ottawa with excess money in the form of budget surpluses, and the provinces perpetually short of cash to meet their costly and extensive constitutional responsibilities in health care, education, and child care.

Given that promise why should he squeeze provinces now by cancelling daycare funding, only to give back money to eliminate the fiscal imbalance? Why create a headache for the premiers for a year or two when his larger and admirable goal is to permanently ease their financial problems?

What's needed is a transitional arrangement whereby Ottawa agrees to honour the federal-provincial arrangement now in place until a deal is struck to resolve the fiscal imbalance, at which point Ottawa can terminate interim arrangements, knowing the provinces are better-placed to carry the load.

It is simple. It is doable. It is the better way.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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