

McGuinty hopes Harper will be 'flexible' on day care deals [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There's still cause for hope that Prime Minister Stephen Harper will be "flexible" in scrapping the child-care deals that his Liberal predecessor forged with the provinces, Premier Dalton McGuinty said Wednesday.

McGuinty's optimistic outlook is based on Harper's call to Quebec Premier Jean Charest on Tuesday with an offer to negotiate a "transition period" before nixing funding for the province's new day care deal on March 31, 2007.

"Prime Minister Harper has demonstrated he's got some flexibility on this issue," McGuinty said Wednesday after a speech to Ontario farmers.

"He got on the phone with Charest and said, 'Listen, let's talk about this thing, and I think we can work something out.' So, what does that mean for us? I take it from that that he does in fact have some flexibility and I look forward to having my conversation as well."

It remains unclear whether Harper would be willing to offer similar concessions to other provinces before the \$5-billion Liberal plan to create a national day care system is scrapped.

Ontario believes Harper is obliged to uphold the existing deal, since it was made with the government, not with the Liberal party, McGuinty said.

"We entered into an agreement with the Government of Canada, not with the Paul Martin Liberals," McGuinty said. "There are thousands and thousands of families who are relying on that new agreement."

Ontario child care groups are also revving up to put pressure on Ontario Conservative MPs, including Human Resources Minister Diane Finley, to honour the agreements, which took years to negotiate and are considered a step towards a national child-care program.

"What Harper's plan is about is not child care at all," said Kira Heineck, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"It is primarily an income supplement for young families with children."

Heineck suggested the Conservatives could keep everyone happy by boosting the current child tax benefit while maintaining the day-care plan laid out by the former government.

Ontario stands to lose the 25,000 registered day-care spaces it planned to create by 2008 if the deal is tossed, she said.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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