

Child care showdown [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stephen Harper is facing a showdown with the premiers over his plan to scrap child care deals that were years in the making.

The prime minister offered yesterday to negotiate a "transition period" with Quebec before cutting off related funding to all 10 provinces after March.

It wasn't immediately clear whether other provinces will get similar offers before the Conservatives snuff the Liberal plan to set up a \$5-billion national day-care system.

But leaders in Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba said yesterday they expect the Tories to honour commitments made by the former government.

Harper made a point of calling Quebec Premier Jean Charest earlier in the day.

Details have not been worked out on whether funding would be extended in Quebec or for how long, said Harper spokesman William Stairs. "He started with the premier of Quebec because they have the most established (day-care) system in place."

The five-year deal signed by Quebec and Ottawa in October hands \$1.1 billion to the province with few strings attached.

Will other provinces be offered transition periods?

"We'll see what happens," Stairs said. "We have a plan for child care. We ran on that plan and we intend to put that plan into place."

Harper announced Monday that he'll move fast to end agreements negotiated over more than two years with all 10 provinces.

The Liberals committed \$5 billion over five years to help create early-learning spaces. But the Conservatives slammed the deal as a potential black hole of overspending that doesn't offer parents real choice.

They want to give parents \$1,200 a year for each child under age six starting July 1. They will also offer \$250 million in tax credits to employers and non-profit agencies that cover the full cost of providing new spaces.

The Tories say the plan could create 125,000 spots over five years.

Ontario and Manitoba also signed five-year funding pacts, while the other provinces had one-year agreements in principle as they worked out details to negotiate longer terms.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said yesterday his government has much invested in its child-care deal. "We worked long and hard to land the agreement ... and we are very reluctant to give that up," he said.

In Manitoba, there was similar resolve. Family Services Minister Christine Melnick said she's optimistic the deals will go ahead.

"I'm not so sure how much has changed. We still have two signed agreements with the Government of Canada. Our expectation is that they will be honoured," said Melnick.

The province remains committed to its five-year plan, said Melnick. She stopped short of saying the province would kick in any extra funds if Ottawa doesn't come through with the money. "I think there's a lot of room for discussion," said Melnick.

- reprinted from the Winnipeg Sun

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