

Harper offers Quebec 'transition' child-care deal [CA-QC]^[1]

Author: Bailey, Sue

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EXCERPTS

Stephen Harper has offered to negotiate a "transition period" with Quebec before scrapping federal child-care funding to the province after March 31, 2007.

It wasn't immediately clear whether other provinces will get similar offers.

The prime minister called Quebec Premier Jean Charest on Tuesday as Harper faces a potential showdown with premiers over plans to nix child-care deals that were years in the making.

Details have not been worked out on whether funding would be extended in Quebec or for how long, said Harper spokesman William Stairs.

The two men plan to meet soon in Ottawa, Stairs said.

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 just hours after being sworn in Monday that he'll move fast to end agreements negotiated over more than two years with all 10 provinces.

Charest has warned that child care falls squarely on Quebec's jurisdictional turf, and that the five-year Quebec deal hands \$1.1 billion to the province with few strings attached.

"We want the agreement reached with the former government to be respected," he said in St-Georges-de-Beauce, south of Quebec City.

Ontario and Manitoba also signed five-year funding pacts, while the other provinces had signed one-year agreements in principle as they worked out details to negotiate longer terms. That process was interrupted by the recent federal election.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said Tuesday that his Liberal government has much invested in its child-care deal.

"All I know is that we worked long and hard to land the agreement we have in place and we are very reluctant to give that up. We think that serves the interest of Ontarians and serves them well."

Ontario's minister of children and youth services, Mary Anne Chambers, has repeatedly stressed that her government negotiated in good faith with the government of Canada — not with the now-defeated Liberals.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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