

Provinces fear Tory child care plan [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Some provincial ministers who helped the federal Liberals forge the beginnings of a national child-care system say the Conservative plan to scrap the program will hurt working parents who need quality care for their children.

Joanne Crofford, Saskatchewan's Minister of Community Resources and Employment, said this week that the Conservative decision to cancel, after one year, bilateral child-care agreements with the provinces that were worth a combined \$4.8-billion over five years will cause "huge" problems.

"The whole country spent a year agreeing on a vision for child care in Canada. This was not a small process. This was a large process that engaged every province and territory, that engaged hundreds of stakeholder groups, parents et cetera. And the prevailing view was that we needed a child-care system in Canada," Ms. Crofford said.

"Whether full-time or part-time, most parents choose to work. And, in order to do that, they need to know that their children have safe, affordable child care that provides them with the same developmental opportunities that they would have had at home."

At his first press conference since winning the election, prime-minister-designate Stephen Harper said he believes his party's decision to replace the Liberal child-care plan with direct, taxable payments to parents of \$1,200 annually for every child under six years of age is extremely popular.

In addition to the subsidy for parents, the Conservatives say they will give tax credits to help employers and non-profit associations create child-care spaces. But the opposition argues that the proposals will not provide enough affordable, quality spaces.

Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba, which signed five-year funding agreements with the Liberals in addition to the agreements in principle with all of the provinces, have indicated no eagerness to see them cancelled.

Quebec Premier Jean Charest has asked Mr. Harper to abide by the agreement that was signed with his province, saying that the new government is welcome to give families \$1,200 per child as long as those payments do not undermine the existing deal.

"I expect Mr. Harper to respect the agreement that we have signed with the federal government. If Mr. Harper chooses to do more, that will be his decision," Mr. Charest said at a news conference.

Christine Melnick, Manitoba's Minister of Family Services and Housing, has also said that she would not object to new payments for parents, but wants existing deals to continue. And Mary Anne Chambers, Ontario's Minister of Children and Youth Services, said scrapping current agreements would be "disastrous, really."

"I have to hope that the fact that three provinces -- Manitoba, Quebec and Ontario -- have those five-year agreements means something to this [federal] government, because this is not about the governments of Manitoba, Quebec and Ontario. It is about the people of those provinces who have said we need this."

Progressive Conservative Senator Lowell Murray predicted the Senate could take a closer look at the issue if the Commons agrees to break the signed agreements.

"All provinces signed agreements and, as far as I know, there's only one or two of them that believe it's all right for Mr. Harper to unilaterally abrogate those agreements in favour of reviving a baby bonus. So I think we have to look at that," he said. But, as he pointed out, not all provinces are unhappy.

Joan MacAlpine-Styles, New Brunswick's Minister of Family and Community Services, said cancelling the agreements should pose no problem for her province, the last to sign on to the Liberal plan.

"The new government hasn't been sworn in yet, so it's a little premature to say, like Chicken Little, the sky is falling . . .," Ms. MacAlpine-Styles said.

Jody Korchinski, the communications director for Alberta Children's Services, would say only that minister Heather Forsyth is looking

forward to meeting with the new federal cabinet minister.

Krista Grant, a communications adviser for David Morse, Nova Scotia's Minister of Community Services, said her province will have to abandon its five-year strategy.

"Every bit of funding is positive," she said, "but we were working toward a five-year plan. And Jeannette MacAulay, the deputy minister of social services and seniors for Prince Edward Island, said her province will support any program that ensures good, affordable care.

But in Saskatchewan, Ms. Crofford says the Conservative plan comes up short. It costs \$6,300 a year to pay for a quality licensed child-care space with trained staff, she said. "Of that, the province pays about \$3,700, and the balance is paid by parents and by fundraising that the child care does. So the \$1,200 figure is way, way, way short of what it actually costs."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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