

Child care fight looming [CA] ^[1]

Author: Mills, Andrew

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Jan 2006

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

They've had knots in their stomachs for weeks over Stephen Harper's pledge to do away with Canada's fledgling child-care system — now it's time to do something about it.

The small band of advocates who have been battling for decades to establish a high-quality universal child-care system in Canada — a group that came painfully close to reaching their goal under Martin's Liberal government — are meeting in Ottawa today to plot out their next battle.

It won't be an easy fight.

"The landscape has shifted dramatically in the last week," said Monica Lysack, executive director of the Canadian Childcare Advocacy Association, who will be at the meeting. "It's not even what many of us expected."

The Conservative government has promised to, after one year, halt payments the former Liberal government had started making to the provinces to kick-start start child-care programs over the next five years.

Since the federal-provincial agreements are simply political documents — that is, no legislation was enacted to pave way for them — nothing can legally stop Harper's government from declaring them null and void.

"The Conservatives are in a position of some strength, actually," said Ken Battle, head of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. "They can just walk away from them."

The Conservative child-care plan calls for giving parents of pre-schoolers \$1,200 a year per child to spend as they wish.

But to do so, the Conservatives will have to pass a law in the House of Commons. It is far from certain that the three opposition parties will support such a move.

Child-care supporters say they must now work to convince provincial governments, federal opposition parties and the Canadian public not to let the Conservative government walk away from commitments the Liberals' made to the provinces.

"I don't understand if every time a government comes in you just say, 'We're not going to do what the previous government made a commitment to do,'" said Martha Friendly, head of the University of Toronto Childcare Research and Resource Unit. "If that happens, well how does this country work?"

"Child care is a flagship for federalism," adds Lysack. "And if you look at it that way, the Conservatives are dismantling federalism: no deals with the provinces, here's money directly to parents that completely circumvents the provinces...."

"They're saying to the provinces, 'There's no federal role here. You're on your own.'"

Advocates see their allies as the provincial governments that were counting on the next instalments of federal money to create more child-care spaces.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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