

It won't be smooth sailing between Ottawa and Quebec [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When no reporter asked at Harper's first post-election news conference about the U.S. ambassador's remarks about Arctic sovereignty, Harper raised them himself. He used it as a pretext to distance himself from the Bush administration and to try to assure Canadians of his independence from it.

But the "line in the ice" between himself and Washington was not the only one he drew at his news conference. Less noticed was the one between himself and Charest as well as the opposition parties that outnumber his in the new Parliament.

Defying the opposition explicitly and Charest by implication, Harper reiterated his commitment to replace the former Martin government's subsidies to the provinces for child care with payments to parents.

All three opposition parties oppose the proposal. And Charest had said he hoped in spite of the Conservatives' election promise, Harper's new government would respect the child-care agreement concluded last October between his and Martin's governments.

The child-care agreements between Ottawa and the provinces can be cancelled by either side on one year's notice. The Conservatives have said they would do so and reallocate to parents the funds that were to have been transferred to the provinces.

If Ottawa does so before April 1, the Quebec government would lose \$807 million over three years. And, some argue, the fiscal imbalance between the two governments, which the Conservatives have promised to correct, would actually be worsened.

But Harper said the Conservative promise of direct payments to parents is "very popular" and that "Canadian parents and families expect us to deliver on this and frankly expect the Parliament as a whole to deliver them that benefit."

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

Region: Quebec^[2]

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