

Harper makes clear to provinces that Liberal national daycare program is dead [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stephen Harper has all but dashed any provincial hopes that a minority Conservative government might rethink its plan to abandon long-term funding deals for a national child-care program.

Harper said he's open to hearing from the opposition parties who roundly criticized his plans to give parents \$1,200 a year for each child under six.

But during his first news conference following Monday's election, he left little room for compromise.

"I do believe Canadian parents and families expect us to deliver on this and, frankly, expect Parliament as a whole to deliver them that benefit."

The slim minority Harper was able to eke out will force him to co-operate with all three main opposition parties on various issues, especially those affecting the budget.

Both the Liberals and the NDP have criticized the Tory plan for failing to help working parents or address the need for better early childhood education.

Harper has said he would have to abandon the last four years of the Liberal government's \$4.8-billion, five-year deal with all the provinces in order to pay for his plan, which includes \$250 million a year in tax credits to help private and community-based day-care centres create new spaces.

That reality doesn't sit well with several provincial governments.

"A signed agreement is a strong document," Christine Melnick, Manitoba's minister of family services and housing, said in an interview from Winnipeg.

Manitoba's NDP government was the first to reach an agreement with Ottawa last April.

Melnick said the province, which already had committed to its own five-year plan to "attract, train and retain" day-care workers, planned to use the remaining four years of federal funding to complement its plan.

She suggests the Conservatives consider combining the existing plan with its own.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and Saskatchewan Premier Lorne Calvert have both expressed concern this week about the status of their deals.

McGuinty, a Liberal, said it was in the Conservative government's best interest to "reach out" to Ontarians by protecting all existing federal-provincial deals, including child care.

Calvert said his NDP government's plans to introduce a pre-Kindergarten program by the end of the year will be in limbo without federal funding.

The Conservatives should not look at the deal as a Liberal creation, but as a Government of Canada document, he added.

"We've taken the view that early childhood education is essential to the social well-being of our province, and in fact essential to the economic well-being of our province," Calvert said earlier this week.

Provincial opposition to the Tory plan is not unanimous, however.

New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord has called the federal Conservative plan compatible with his own Tory government's vision.

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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