

Child care changes possibly a minefield [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Much of the new Conservative government's platform on social issues should pass through Parliament virtually uncontested, but plans to replace the national child-care program with cash payments for parents will be a political minefield, predict political watchers.

"I'd be astonished if they found support in the House for this wedge issue," said Peter McCormick, a University of Lethbridge political science professor.

"If (the Tories) can't find a second party, they will lose it -- or they can force it to a confidence matter, and not resign over it. Then, they can say to the public: 'Well, we tried.'

"Either way, they are going to have a minefield on their hands," McCormick said.

The Conservative plan -- one of the party's campaign centrepieces -- promises to give parents of children under the age of six \$1,200 a year per child to spend as they wish. The party will also use tax incentives to encourage businesses to create more day-care spaces.

While McCormick said it won't be easy to pass such a plan, Calgary Nose Hill MP Diane Ablonczy disagreed.

Two days after Canadians ousted the governing Liberals and elected Stephen Harper's Conservatives to a minority Parliament, the veteran MP said she doesn't expect Opposition members to sideswipe the Tory stance on social issues.

"Canadians have given us a strong mandate on a very specific platform, and it's one that we laid out over and over and over again," Ablonczy said, predicting that none of the parties &em; or the electorate -- want to return to the polls anytime soon, so it will facilitate co-operation in the House.

But the Tory government's program could face opposition from various provinces.

The Conservative initiative will replace the Liberals' federal- provincial program, implemented last year, which saw money given directly to each province for day-care.

On Tuesday, Quebec Premier Jean Charest said he expects Harper to respect that deal, while political analysts believe the issue will become a flashpoint in Parliament.

"We're putting money into the hands of parents," Ablonczy said. "It will be a hot debate, but I can't imagine it not being in our first budget."

But Robert Glossop, director of research at the lobby group Vanier Institute of the Family in Ontario, suggested the Tories' policies aren't broad enough to serve all Canadians.

Because of their minority position, Glossop urged the Tories to use restraint.

"They can't change the landscape overnight," he said. "They need to take a deep breath and go slow. But they're going to find it tricky."

- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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