

Child care splits parties, parents [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Liberals, who introduced a \$5 billion, five-year national child care plan in their budget last year, say if re-elected they will make it a permanent federal program and commit at least another \$6 billion to keep it going until 2015.

But if the recent Tory surge holds and Canadians elect the Conservatives on Jan. 23, that plan will be history.

And as many as 96 new child-care centres in Toronto and about 4,700 subsidized spaces in the city's poorest neighbourhoods will be lost, Mayor David Miller warned this week.

"It means working parents across this city will find it more difficult to work," he said. "It means particularly that the poorest working families won't have access to safe, affordable child care for their children. And that's one of the key issues that people in the poorest communities raise."

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, who put the plan together for the Liberals and who managed to get all 10 provinces to sign bilateral agreements on the new initiative before the writ was dropped in November, can't believe the long-sought social program may be slipping away.

"I'm heartsick," he said in an interview from the campaign trail in Ottawa this week.

"How many chances do you get to do something really important like this? We're there, on the verge of creating it. It's happening. That's the part that ties me up in knots."

But Conservative intergovernmental affairs critic Rona Ambrose, who helped write the Tory child-care platform, thinks the Liberal plan is so underfunded, most parents would never see services anyway.

It's far more efficient to put money directly in the hands of parents and give tax credits to employers, to create workplace child care where people need it most, she said.

Employers would be able to access \$250 million in capital funding over five years, or \$10,000 per new spot, to create 125,000 new child-care spaces across the country, she said.

Child-care advocates heckled the Tory plan at a citywide all-candidates meeting on children's issues, staged by daycare and child poverty groups at Metro Hall Thursday night.

"Twelve hundred dollars won't even pay for one month of child care in the centre where I work," a daycare worker scolded Beaches-East York Conservative candidate Peter Conroy.

But Conroy, who said his party's \$1,200 annual child-care allowance would both help families get child care and address child poverty, was undeterred by the largely unsympathetic crowd of about 300.

Nowhere in this federal election is the difference in political philosophy more clearly revealed than on child care, says Ken Battle, head of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

In an analysis of the Conservative child-care platform prepared this week, Battle notes that the Liberals and NDP advocate a "supply side" approach by creating a federally funded system of quality, affordable services, much like public health and education.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives favour a "demand side" tactic that uses federal funds to pay parents directly and allows them to purchase child care.

However, the Conservatives' allowance is actually less than \$1,200 because it would trigger both reductions in federal/provincial income tested benefits and increases in income taxes.

As a result, working-poor and modest-income families would get smaller benefits than middle- and upper-income families. And it would favour one-earner families over single-parent and double-income families.

Most middle- and upper-income earners would get only about \$800, he said.

The biggest losers would be modest-income families earning between \$30,000 and \$40,000, who would end up with just \$388 a year.

A better alternative would be to use the money to increase the existing Canada Child Tax Benefit, he said.

In another "reality check" of the Tory plan, the Canadian Child Care Advocacy Association notes that a tax credit of \$10,000 per space won't go very far in big cities like Vancouver, where it costs between \$20,000 and \$40,000 to create a new child-care space

When Mike Harris's Ontario Tories introduced tax incentives to employers in the 1990s, not a single new space was created. Similar programs in Saskatchewan and New Brunswick didn't spark much construction either, said association executive director Monica Lysack.

Moreover, private employers are generally unwilling to cost-share operating costs of workplace child care and without provincial subsidies, most parents can't afford it.

What's more, there is nothing in the Tory plan to boost chronically low child-care worker wages, improve staff training or reduce staff turnover - all key components to ensuring quality care for our youngest citizens, Lysack said.

"These promises are a throwback to the past," says the association in an open letter to voters this week.

"They will not deliver the kind of high-quality child care our children deserve, nor the support today's parents need."

But what about the parents who can't find a child-care space? Wouldn't they be better off taking Harper's money now?

Again, it's back to philosophy, says Martha Friendly, head of the University of Toronto Childcare Research and Resource Unit.

"I guess these parents need to ask themselves if they want to make a choice for themselves or for the greater good," she says.

The Liberals' nascent national child-care program might be vastly underfunded and may not be able to provide a spot for their child today, but Friendly argues that if allowed to proceed, new spaces will be added and there might be daycare for a future child.

"Many of us have been working on this since our own children were babies in the hope that there would be something in place for our grandchildren," Friendly said.

"Wouldn't parents today like to see something in place for their kids when they grow up and are in the workforce?" she said.

Friendly commented on the estimate by the Caledon Institute's Battle that most middle- and upper-income families would see about \$800 a year from the Tory child-care allowance after taxes.

"It's a small bribe, really, if you are an affluent person," she said. "It's not even enough to go to Cuba for a week. And it's certainly not going to help a person decide to be an at-home parent."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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