

Gulf between parties is size of a small child: Liberals, Tories differ distinctly on daycare options [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Both the Liberals and the Conservatives are hoping child care becomes a big issue this election. Each side believes its vastly different approach to looking after the charges of Canada's working families will be a winner with voters.

By transferring a historic \$5-billion over five years to the provinces for child care beginning this year, the Liberal government started the massive task of building a system of daycares that could one day resemble health or public education in size and scope. But even supporters of the plan acknowledge it's going to take a lot more time and money before parents see much impact, and those living in rural areas may never benefit.

The Conservatives propose spending even more, but giving the dollars directly to the parents of preschoolers in the form of a monthly allowance to use on anything from babysitters to nursery school, a departure from the tax credit proposed by Stephen Harper during the previous election.

The two approaches are likely to play to different demographics, with couples working traditional nine-to-five hours favouring the Liberals' regulated daycare spots. Parents working night shifts, part-time or living near extended family members willing to look after their children -- as is the case with many immigrant families -- will likely prefer the Conservatives' cash.

The Liberal government managed to get all 10 provinces to sign on to child care and early-learning agreements, with the last two holdouts -- Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick -- coming on board during the government's final days in office. The agreements give each of the provinces their share of the \$5-billion over five years in return for a pledge to spend the money creating quality, regulated child care spots. Otherwise, provinces can deliver child care according to their needs: Ontario, for example, is building a system around public schools; British Columbia has made aboriginal child care a priority; Manitoba is sending the cash to the non-profit sector only while New Brunswick will attempt to deliver child care services to rural families.

"It's a really good start," says Monica Lysack, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, based in Ottawa.

"But it's just the beginning. We still don't have a national system." According to Ms. Lysack, an additional cash infusion of about \$2-billion would be required for capital investment across the country.

The majority of child care spaces exist in a patchwork of non-profit community centres, commercial centres, family homes and private nursery schools. And still more children are cared for by a mix of several of these options, in addition to grandparents, neighbours and babysitters picking up the slack.

While child care advocates like Ms. Lysack say this patchwork is the result of an inadequate child care supply, the Conservatives see the status quo as a reflection of Canadians' diverse needs and choices.

"There are so many different kinds of families that need to be supported," said Rona Ambrose, the Conservative critic. "A lot of parents work flex-time, part-time, nighttime and seasonally. There is such a variety and diversity of family make-up."

British Columbia and Alberta provide parents who qualify for child care subsidies a small amount of flexibility on using the funds, but in Ontario, low-income families can put their government dollars solely toward regulated daycare, and then only if a spot is available.

"The government is saying these parents are idiots and can't make their own decisions," says Kate Tennier, a Toronto mother and spokeswoman for the group Advocates for Child Care Choice.

"You might have a perfectly good grandmother or neighbour who could look after your children, but you are forced into regulated daycare."

So the Conservatives are proposing to circumvent the provinces and send a taxable child care allowance for parents to use as they choose.

Ms. Ambrose says the party is still costing its platform and does not have a dollar amount, but the entire plan will surpass the \$5-billion pledged by the Liberals.

A Conservative government would also offer tax rebates and capital cost writeoffs to public institutions and private companies that build daycare facilities near parents' workplaces.

"The infrastructure part is so expensive, we have to look at ways to bring other partners in the private and public sector on board."

This is heresy to most daycare advocates who envision a system that would one day have public child care centres all over the country staffed by workers as well-trained and well-paid as elementary schoolteachers.

"This would in no way direct the development of an early-learning system," said Kira Heineck, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare.

She said handing cash to parents will not improve the quality of daycares, the training of early- childhood educators or provide Canadians with accountability for their tax dollars.

"We know that children at age two or three have educational needs that are as great, if not greater than children who are six or seven."

According to Ms. Heineck, Canadians want child care to be another public system, akin to health or education. "This approach does not build a system."

But to Ms. Ambrose, that is precisely the point. Whether parents choose to leave their infants, toddlers and preschoolers with grandparents, neighbours, babysitters or enrol them in daycares or nursery schools, it's not up to the government to decide for them.

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