

Dryden achieves 10 child care agreements ^[1]

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Excerpt

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden achieved his goal of obtaining early-learning and child care deals with all 10 provinces as his Liberal government counts down its final days in office. Agreements yesterday with New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island leaves just the three territories to sign on to Mr. Dryden's plan to create a national system of child care for Canada -- a promise the Liberals have been making for more than a decade. "It's exciting," Mr. Dryden said after the final signature had been obtained in Fredericton. "In many ways, now the work begins. But now, finally for parents and early childhood educators, it's work with real possibilities." Mr. Dryden had stipulated that the money must be put toward quality, regulated child care but Premier Bernard Lord had insisted on greater autonomy over how it was spent. It seems that the pending expiry date on the federal Liberals helped move things in Mr. Lord's favour. The province has been offered extended flexibility in determining how it will use the \$110-million it will receive through the federal program in return for its promise to be guided by the principles of quality, universality, inclusiveness, accessibility and a focus on development that have been the core of the other agreements. Mr. Lord, reached by The Canadian Press on his way to a first ministers meeting in British Columbia, said there's no question that a looming federal election helped spur Ottawa into action. "As the saying goes, there's nothing like a hanging at noon to focus the mind at night," he said. The Conservatives say they would prefer to give tax breaks to families with young children so they can spend the money as they see fit. But they have also said they will live up to agreements that have been signed with the provinces should they form the next government. Meanwhile, in Quebec, the Parti Québécois said yesterday the provincial Liberal government was bowing to lobby groups that want to bring in American-style daycare centre chains to the province. The PQ said one of the lobbyists was Beryl Wajzman, a former Montreal bagman for the Quebec Liberal Party and the Liberal Party of Canada. Mr. Wajzman was one of the people Prime Minister Paul Martin banned from the party after the Gomery report on the sponsorship scandal. Wajzman told his client, Mad Science Group, in a February 2004 letter that he had received support from various ministers and Liberal backbenchers in obtaining funding for four daycare centres in the Montreal region. Mad Science Group president Ariel Shlien later received permits and grants for those centres. Family Minister Carole Théberge said she has never met or spoken with Mr. Wajzman. She said she met Ariel Shlien, whose Mad Science Group was a client of Mr. Wajzman last year, but insisted no rules were broken and the daycare operator received no special treatment. The PQ contends that the government's proposed daycare reform will allow individuals or corporations to own and operate chains of daycare centres.

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