

Legislation would destroy \$7-a-day daycare [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A civil war is ripping through Quebec's daycare system.

Bill 124, presented by Family Minister Carole Theberge, is the battleground between two schools of thinking on how daycare should be organized in Quebec.

The Association quebecoise des centres de la petite enfance, representing 884 CPEs has its roots in not-for-profit, community daycare, and sees Bill 124 as an attempt to dismantle Quebec's \$7-a-day daycare program.

The breakaway Centre quebecois de la petite enfance claims it has 150 CPEs, and its membership is drawn from agencies, which organized for-profit family daycare before 1997 when the Parti Quebecois created its then \$5 daycare program.

The Centre supports Bill 124.

Claudette Pitre-Robin, who works with South Shore CPEs affiliated with the Association, said yesterday the Centre had 102 members when Theberge granted it funding of close to \$100,000, and has been losing members since that time.

Francine Lessard, now director-general of the Centre, denied yesterday her organization was set up with help from Theberge to undermine the Association.

But she did admit the Centre worked closely with Theberge in drawing up Bill 124, which would break the existing link between the CPEs and for-profit family daycare centres, creating 130 new co-ordinating offices to oversee the family daycare centres.

Camil Bouchard, the Parti Quebecois daycare critic, has charged that the Centre was given advance information, giving its members an advantage in taking on new roles as daycare co-ordinating offices.

The offices would play a dispatching role similar to that of the former daycare agencies.

Lessard confirmed yesterday some CPEs belonging to the Centre are gearing up to become daycare co-ordinating offices.

"We believe what the minister tells us," Lessard said. "We never hid that we have been working with the minister since the month of June in refining this bill."

Jean Robitaille, who replaced Lessard as director-general of the Association when the latter left to form the Centre, said yesterday while Theberge has maintained a cozy relationship with the Centre, the Association was kept in the dark on her intentions until mid-July.

The Association objected then that breaking the link between the CPEs and family daycare centres would be a step backward.

There were no meetings until September when the Association presented a counterproposal that Violaine Ouellette of the Association said respected financing cuts Theberge proposed, while maintaining the link between all CPEs and the family daycare centres.

Theberge has organized by-invitation-only hearings on Bill 124, which end today.

But even the invited organizations, ranging from Videotron founder-turned-philanthropist Andre Chagnon to Michele Asselin, president of the Federation des femmes du Quebec, have told Theberge that Bill 124 threatens Quebec's daycare system.

Yesterday, the National Assembly question period was dominated by questions about the role of Beryl Wajzman, one of 10 members of the federal Liberal Party who were expelled from the party after Justice John Gomery named them.

The opposition PQ asked questions about lobbying efforts by Wajzman, acting for The Mad Science Group, a Montreal company that has branched out from its core business, doing magic science shows for children, to open four for-profit family daycare centres.

The PQ's Bouchard suggested this was the thin edge of the wedge and could open the door to for-profit day-care chains moving into Quebec.

"I never met Mr. Wajzman," said a harried Theberge, adding the purpose of Bill 124 is to make Quebec's daycare system better.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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