

Activist groups want Ottawa to expand EI system [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Activist groups say they will press the federal government to beef up the employment insurance system after the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling that Ottawa has legitimate constitutional power to create add-ons such as parental leave.

The top court said yesterday that Ottawa was within its rights to use the EI system to provide payments to natural and adoptive parents when they take time off work to care for young children.

The ruling quashed a 2004 Quebec Court of Appeal decision that said the federal government can't use EI to offer social benefits, which are exclusively under provincial jurisdiction.

The Quebec court had said unemployment insurance was conceived after the Depression to replace wages of people who lost their jobs for economic reasons, not for breaks in employment for personal reasons such as having children.

But the Supreme Court said Parliament had the right to adapt EI "to the new realities of the workplace."

Monica Lysack, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, said her organization will press for an expansion of the EI system to cover self-employed workers, including those who provide unlicensed child care in their homes.

"The expansion of parental benefits was a huge step to promote family-work balance, but it doesn't go far enough," she said.

Another key area for expansion of EI, said Canadian Labour Congress executive vice-president Barbara Byers, is in education and training. Workers who take a break to upgrade skills should be able to collect benefits, she said. "They need to give people limited income to go back to school and deal with the skills shortage the government keeps talking about."

Human Resources Minister Belinda Stronach hinted yesterday that EI benefits may be expanded. "What this judgment really says is that the federal government not only has the right, but also the responsibility to evolve EI programs as society evolves," she said.

The constitutional debate over EI began when the Quebec government decided to offer its own parental-benefit program in 1996. When it could not negotiate a deal with Ottawa, the province began a court challenge of the federal system. Ironically, Quebec and Ottawa came to a deal before the Supreme Court delivered its verdict on the underlying issues.

The two governments agreed in March that Quebec can run its own parental-leave program, and Ottawa will turn over some of the EI premiums it receives to pay for it. The Quebec program will begin on Jan. 1, with \$750-million a year from the federal government.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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