

Child care key to confronting China, India: PM [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada's competitive edge in the looming economic showdown with China and India must be honed soon after its toddlers leave the crib, Prime Minister Paul Martin said Tuesday.

The prime minister said his proposed national child care plan will help Canadian tots get a head start in a global economy where only the smartest countries will thrive.

"It's about development and learning during the crucial time in life when potential is most readily nurtured and developed," Martin said in an address to senior bureaucrats.

Re-positioning Canada's economy for the next century was the central theme of his remarks.

The address was constructed like a throne speech, laying out the Liberal government's agenda in the months before an election expected next March.

His proposed national daycare plan will be part of an agenda that will move his government beyond scandal, Martin said.

The program will be an integral part of improving productivity, he said.

"A successful head start is important for all Canadians," Martin said.

"I am convinced that when future generations look back they will recognize in our pan-Canadian approach to early learning, a project of nation-building in the same sense as universal medicare."

Canadians must understand that the intellectual bar is being raised globally and only the best-educated countries will successfully compete.

He predicted China and India - which comprise one-third of the world's population - will vault upward in a race for top jobs in research-based industries. Canadians need to start developing learning skills before they get into formal schools, he added.

"Today we don't just want our children to succeed in school. We need them to."

The Liberal government has promised \$5 billion over five years for new provincially run, low-fee day care programs and is in the process of striking funding deals with the provinces.

Six provinces - Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Alberta - have already signed on.

Quebec's \$7-a-day program is the model for the plan.

The Conservatives have dismissed the daycare plan as a potential bureaucratic boondoggle.

Tories say the daycare cash should simply be turned over to parents.

"I really don't think we need the Liberals telling us what we need to do to raise our children," said Tory critic Carol Skelton.

"I know lots of little children that read before they go to school and are very outgoing and have had the very best care from a stay-at-home mom. And grandmas, too."

Scandinavian countries have large government day-care programs similar to the one Canada is creating. But the taxes in Nordic countries also hover around the 50-per-cent mark of GDP - compared with under 40 per cent in Canada.

Martin also said Tuesday that the federal government would like to cut taxes while improving social programs.

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: economics ^[3]

child development [4]

funding [5]

federal programs [6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6]

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