

Day care deal appears imminent [CA-NB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

New Brunswick is so close to signing a five-year, \$100-million day-care deal with Ottawa that the two sides have started talking about how they will announce the hard-won agreement.

Native Affairs Minister Andy Scott said Monday he's even hoping Prime Minister Paul Martin will participate in the signing ceremony, which might erase memories of another proposed photo opportunity that ended in political acrimony last spring.

"I would love to have the prime minister visit New Brunswick." Mr. Scott said after his latest fence-mending session with New Brunswick's Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Percy Mockler.

He added that more "significant progress" was made when he and Mr. Mockler met in a conference room at the Daigle Motel in St. Leonard for 90 minutes Monday morning. The meeting was a follow-up to their first get-together over pizza at Mr. Scott's Fredericton home last month.

"It was another good meeting, and we're going to meet again in another 10 to 14 days," Mr. Scott said.

Mr. Mockler did not return calls made to his cell phone Monday, but he had suggested after his first meeting with Mr. Scott on Aug. 17 that a day-care deal was "very close."

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden cautioned in an interview last week, however, that he has seen no substantial changes in the negotiations since he first declared the two sides close to a deal at the start of the summer.

"We've been ready (to sign an agreement) for probably four months," Mr. Dryden said. "But in order to make a deal you need two parties."

Mr. Dryden dismissed suggestions that reaching a deal with New Brunswick has been complicated by Ottawa's decision in July against helping with the \$1.4-billion refurbishment of the Point Lepreau nuclear power plant.

"As any citizen would see, they're completely unrelated," Mr. Dryden said.

However, a proposed signing ceremony in Saint John last May - to announce an alleged agreement in principle on day care - was scuttled amid federal claims that Premier Bernard Lord also wanted a deal on the Point Lepreau refurbishment before he would share the stage with Mr. Martin.

Mr. Lord has repeatedly argued that Ottawa's cookie-cutter approach for establishing a five-year, \$5-billion national early learning and day-care program won't work in New Brunswick. In turn, he has asked for more flexibility to allow his government to use of some its share of the federal funding to help stay-at home parents and rural families.

The federal government has countered that New Brunswick is free to allocate its own provincial revenues toward such initiatives, but that Ottawa's money is intended exclusively for regulated early learning and child-care programs.

- reprinted from the New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

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