

Wrong message on child care [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Goar, Carol

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EXCERPTS Bewildered e-mail started flying almost as soon as Premier Dalton McGuinty appointed a new minister of children and youth services. Child care advocates hadn't expected Marie Bountrogianni, the Hamilton child psychiatrist who'd held the job since the Liberals took power, to be shuffled last week. They couldn't understand why Mary Anne Chambers, the Scarborough bank executive who'd previously served as minister of training, colleges and universities, had been given the portfolio. Puzzlement quickly turned to concern. Although Bountrogianni hadn't been as bold as child-care advocates would have liked, she had made more progress than any minister in recent memory. Child-care advocates don't want to prejudge Chambers. But they find her a surprising choice. Until 2003, she was a senior vice-president of Scotiabank. Her speciality was electronic banking. Most of her voluntary work was in the fields of post-secondary education and health care. She makes little secret of her distaste for the cut and thrust of politics, which it will be hard to avoid in her new role as minister responsible for everything from young offenders to autistic children. If she has an abiding interest in early childhood development, it hasn't been visible up to now. Chambers professes to be thrilled with her new assignment. Child-care advocates would like to take her at her word, but they can't help wondering what's going on at Queen's Park. The most benign interpretation of Chambers' appointment is that McGuinty thinks the portfolio now needs a manager, not a groundbreaker. Bountrogianni set up the new ministry. (Children's services previously had been scattered across half a dozen government departments.) And she concluded a five-year child-care agreement with her federal counterpart, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, which will bring \$2 billion in new funds into the province. In theory, all that remains to be done is to implement the government's "Best Start" program and ensure that Ottawa lives up to its funding commitment. In reality, some major challenges lie ahead. Chambers will have to decide whether to allow any expansion of for-profit daycare. She will have to negotiate funding arrangements with dozens of municipalities. And she will have to strike a balance between improving the pay and working conditions of early-learning educators and opening new facilities. The gloomiest interpretation of Chambers' appointment is that child care has fallen off the premier's agenda. The newly created children's ministry was the centrepiece of McGuinty's first cabinet 20 months ago. But he barely mentioned it in last week's cabinet shuffle. It would be convenient to get child care out of the spotlight, with an increasing share of the province's revenues going to health care, schools and universities. And installing a low-profile minister would be a good way to do it. The most plausible explanation for Chambers' appointment is that it was an afterthought. McGuinty wanted to make post-secondary education a higher priority, as his government poured \$6.2 billion into the sector. So he put Chris Bentley, a London lawyer who'd performed well as labour minister, in charge of colleges and universities. And he wanted to keep Chambers, whom he'd brought into the cabinet with great fanfare, in a senior portfolio. So he plunked her in children and youth services and shifted Bountrogianni to intergovernmental affairs, a job for which she seems equally ill-suited. A few square pegs usually end up in round holes after a cabinet makeover. This one is particularly unfortunate though. The message it sends is that children's interests are dispensable. - reprinted from the Toronto Star

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