

# The gathering storm: A controversial Conservative initiative should blow the child care debate wide open [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The federal government's stance on the modern family is shaping up to be a hot issue in the next election, but not for the reason you might think.

While same-sex marriage has dominated public debate lately, a clash between Liberals and Conservatives over child care could emerge as a bigger issue by the time of the next campaign, likely in early 2006.

The Liberals made childhood strategy a major thrust in last year's election, and are pressing ahead with their promised \$5-billion, five-year program to boost regulated daycare. Now, Maclean's has learned that the Tories are preparing to counterpunch with an even costlier proposal that they say would offer parents far greater choice.

The issue pits a high-profile Liberal cabinet member against his rising-star Conservative critic. Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, legendary as a former NHL goalie, is the architect of Paul Martin's early childhood policy, and a favourite of the Prime Minister and his inner circle. Edmonton MP Rona Ambrose has taken the lead in designing a Conservative alternative, and she is touted by Stephen Harper's advisers as one of the next generation of Tory bright lights. Friction between Dryden, 57, and Ambrose, 36, made headlines earlier this year when she suggested in the House that he represented a fading generation of "old white guys" trying to impose an outdated vision for daycare on young mothers.

Perhaps surprisingly, Ambrose said the Conservative plan would cost "a lot more money, frankly" than the Liberal program. The Conservatives will propose direct payments to all parents, combined with new tax incentives for companies to expand daycare in the workplace. Ambrose wouldn't say how much parents would get under the new social program, promising the details will be made public when Harper formally announces the scheme sometime in the next few weeks. But she defended the core strategy of giving parents money to spend however they like.

By funnelling money to the provinces only for regulated daycare, she argued, the Liberals are doing nothing for stay-at-home parents, or for working moms and dads who leave young children with relatives or in unregulated care Ambrose said.

Dryden is a staunch champion of subsidizing regulated centres as the backbone of a nationwide daycare and early learning system. In a major speech late last year, he said only regulated care can reliably deliver high standards for health and safety, staff training, ratios of caregivers to kids, and other elements that are key to early childhood development.

Dryden suggests that creating such a system would generate demand from parents -- forcing governments to keep expanding it. "More spaces, higher quality, higher expectations and ambitions, a bigger and growing public appetite, building the pressure on each level of government, to reinforce the commitment implicit in building a system," he said.

But Dryden has found it difficult to coax some provincial politicians there with him. He tried to negotiate a national agreement with all the provinces earlier this year, but failed. Since then, he has struck bilateral deals with five provinces, and is trying to hammer out similar pacts with the remaining five.

The Tory plan would end federal-provincial wrangling by giving parents the money and letting them decide where it would go. Current trends suggest many would not spend it buying regulated daycare: a Statistics Canada report in February found that 47 per cent of kids from six months to five years old have a stay-at-home parent. And among the rest, institutional daycare is not the largest or fastest-growing alternative; care by relatives is. Of children being taken care of by somebody other than a mom or dad, 31.5 per cent were with a relative, up 41 per cent over six years. That compares to 25 per cent who are in daycare centres, up 26 per cent in the same period.

It's shaping up to be a classic ideological battle. The Liberals are struggling to build a system based on government subsidies and regulation. The Conservatives are working on a competing concept that would rely on individual choice and business incentives. Same-sex marriage may be

generating more noise for now, but child care could turn into the family-values policy test that matters most in the next election.

- reprinted from Maclean's Magazine

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/legislation-and-regulation>