

Psst! - the world has changed. Mr. Lord [CA-NB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Maybe during his recent visit to Washington, Premier Bernard Lord was forced to undergo some sort of family values workshop before gaining entry to the White House.

That could explain Mr. Lord's seemingly sudden interest in helping stay-at-home parents.

Sure, Mr. Lord has talked ad nauseam for years about making New Brunswick a better place to live, work and raise a family but he certainly hasn't been talking about the need for specific initiatives to help parents stay at home with their kids.

So his recent musings about how he wants to spend some of New Brunswick's share of Ottawa's \$5 billion day care fund to help stay-at-home parents is surprising as well as worrisome.

He started out with the comment: "I believe in many cases perhaps the best day care some children can have is their own parent at home whether it's the mother or the father."

Then last week - coincidentally after his visit to the White House - he started referring to day cares as "institutions," a word that conjures up the image of jail.

When asked by a reporter why he believes it's better for parents to stay at home with their kids, Mr. Lord said in French: "I was very fortunate to have a mother who stayed at home with me when I was young. My children were very fortunate because their mother stayed at home with them also when they were very young."

Then during the same scrum he added in French: "I don't want to see a situation where we abdicate the responsibility of parents by putting more and more kids in day care."

One press gallery reporter said after the scrum: "It sounds like he's saying to women 'put your aprons back on and get back to the kitchen where you belong'."

The world has changed since Mr. Lord's mother stayed home with him in the 1960s. Nowadays, 75 per cent of New Brunswick parents are in the paid workforce but there are regulated spaces for only 11 per cent of children under 12.

New Brunswick's cash-strapped day care system needs every single cent of the \$100 million Ottawa has earmarked for it. This province desperately needs more regulated day care spaces, higher wages and better training for our day care workers.

The premier is absolutely right that stay-at-home parents need help, but it shouldn't come out of this fund.

His plans are too vague and there's not enough money in this fund to help both day cares and stay-at-home parents in a meaningful way.

While he said the province would spend some money on day cares, Mr. Lord wants a portion of the fund to go toward tax-free cheques for stay-at-home parents. He wouldn't say how much the cheques would be he suggested it would be enough so that parents would be able to buy instructional toys or books or even to pay for some day care.

Parents who stay at home with their kids have the most important job in the world and they need help. But a tax-free cheque large enough to buy some books isn't going to make their life easier and won't go far enough toward improving the early childhood learning a child gets at home.

Neither will the cheques be large enough to make the difference for working parents who want to stay home but just can't afford it.

If the premier truly wants to help stay-at-home parents, he should do so in a meaningful way by pushing for changes to parental leave. Why doesn't he push for two-year parental leaves or lobby to extend parental benefits to those who are self-employed or who work part time? How about pushing for a top-up to parental benefits so more parents could afford to take advantage of the full leave?

Let's see him put those topics on the agendas of First Ministers' meetings. Let's see Mr. Lord raise those issues with Prime Minister Paul Martin during his private meetings. Let's see him lead the way in Canada by going ahead with those tax breaks here in New Brunswick.

In the meantime, Ottawa should stand firm on its refusal to give Mr. Lord the flexibility he wants. And rather than play the family values card in a thinly-veiled attempt to pander to the conservative vote, Mr. Lord should sign a child care deal as soon as possible with Ottawa that sees the money go where it is intended and needed - our day care system.

- reprinted from the Saint John Telegraph-Journal

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