

Dryden hints that daycare agreement is in the offing [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ken Dryden, the federal minister responsible for the all-but-stalled process to strike a national child care deal with the provinces, has dropped the first hint that an announcement is in the offing.

"We've been talking to several provinces and we'll see early in the week. That's all really, I can say to you," the minister of social development said Friday.

With a snap election looming larger by the day, the federal Liberals are under pressure to deliver some sort of agreement that would signal progress in creating a national child care program.

The Liberals have promised national child care in elections past and then done little about it once in office.

This time, they vowed during last year's election campaign, things would be different. But almost a year later, it's not clear what exactly is different.

There has been lots of talk. Dollars have been promised. But the crucial deal still has not been struck.

Dryden will be closely watched in the coming days by child care advocates and the provinces.

What remains unclear is whether he'll announce that all provinces and territories have signed onto a national agreement with the federal government, or whether he'll have to resort to signing individual agreements only with the provinces that are ready to sign.

It's an important distinction. When the federal Liberals first to build a child care system, the goal was to have a national agreement.

Ottawa has earmarked \$5 billion over the next five years to roll out a national system. But before the lion's share of that money was to start flowing, the federal government wanted each province and the territories to agree on the principles that determine how the system will operate.

That may not happen.

In February, Dryden's provincial counterparts walked away from a Vancouver meeting without an agreement about what the so-called QUAD principles — quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment — actually mean.

Nor could the politicians agree on what data would be collected to allow Ottawa to check on how the principles are being met.

Instead, they pledged to meet again following the Feb. 23 federal budget. But two months later, there's no sign of any such meeting.

That has raised suspicions that any announcement Dryden makes in the next few days will not involve a national deal, but rather his plans to sign agreements with each province.

Most provinces are ready to sign a deal, start the federal money flowing, and start developing their own child care programs. After all, insiders say, every province but Alberta and Quebec was willing to sign the agreement in Vancouver.

Yesterday, child care advocates wrote to Prime Minister Paul Martin and NDP Leader Jack Layton, imploring them to sign bilateral agreements before an election call.

"While all 13 provinces and territories may not be willing to sign on to a multilateral agreement at this time, we know that some provinces are open to bilateral agreements. This would be a beginning to base further work," the letter from the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada said.

But what may torpedo any child care plan is the defeat of the federal budget in the House of Commons or a federal election that brings down the Liberals and their budget.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Canada^[2]

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

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/election> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism>